

Lecture Transcript and Course Guidebook



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## **Exploring the Roots of Religion**

**Professor John R. Hale**

*University of Louisville*

**Part 3 of 3**



**THE TEACHING COMPANY**®

# **Exploring the Roots of Religion**

**Part III**

**Professor John R. Hale**



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Archaeology has been the focus of Professor Hale's career, from his undergraduate studies at Yale University to his research at the University of Cambridge, where he received his Ph.D. The subject of his dissertation was the Bronze Age ancestry of the Viking longship, a study that involved field surveys of ship designs in prehistoric rock art in southern Norway and Sweden. During more than 30 years of archaeological work, Professor Hale has excavated at a Romano-British town in Lincolnshire, England, as well as at a Roman villa in Portugal; has carried out interdisciplinary studies of ancient oracle sites in Greece and Turkey, including the famed Delphic oracle; and has participated in an undersea search in Greek waters for lost fleets from the Greek and Persian wars. In addition, Professor Hale is a member of a scientific team developing and refining a method for dating mortar, concrete, and plaster from ancient buildings—a method that employs radiocarbon analysis with an accelerator mass spectrometer.

Professor Hale published *Lords of the Sea: The Epic Story of the Athenian Navy and the Birth of Democracy* in 2009. In addition, he has published his work in *Antiquity*, *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, *The Classical Bulletin*, and *Scientific American*. Most of Professor Hale's work is interdisciplinary and involves collaborations with geologists, chemists, nuclear physicists, historians, zoologists, botanists, physical anthropologists, geographers, and art historians.

Professor Hale has received numerous awards for his distinguished teaching, including the Panhellenic Teacher of the Year Award and the Delphi Center Award. He has toured the United States and Canada as a lecturer for the Archaeological Institute of America and has presented lecture series at museums and universities in Finland, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand.

Professor Hale is the instructor of two other Teaching Company courses: *The Greek and Persian Wars* and *Classical Archaeology of Ancient Greece and Rome*.

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## Exploring the Roots of Religion

### Scope:

The most important record of religious history resides not in books and sacred texts but buried in the earth. Ancient graves, statues, temples, standing stones, sacrificial offerings, and places of initiation all bear witness to the universal human quest for spiritual power and understanding. Since the beginnings of scientific archaeology in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, excavators have been discovering and interpreting evidence ranging from tiny goddess figurines carved from mammoth ivory to entire sacred landscapes, such as at the Giza plateau in Egypt. The millennia of human experience that preceded the invention of writing about 5,000 years ago is only accessible to us through archaeology. And even for more recent religions and cults, the “testimony of the spade” provides an essential perspective that enhances our understanding of the literary tradition.

Archaeology provides evidence that is very different in nature from historical writings. With aerial reconnaissance and remote sensing technology, archaeologists relocate lost temples and other cult sites. With trowels and brushes, they gently remove the dust of ages from buried sites and artifacts. And with space-age laboratory techniques, they analyze the residues left by royal funeral feasts as well as the last meals of sacrificial victims.

Some 30,000 years before scribes made the first religious writings, Ice Age peoples of Europe and the Near East were creating shrines in caves, modeling images of divinities and shamans, and using art and music in ceremonies. Even earlier, in the time of the Neanderthals, some of the tribe’s deceased were laid in their graves with flowers, possibly symbolizing resurrection after death. The first theme of our course, “In the Beginning,” explores these earliest religious rites and the beliefs that inspired them, right down to the time of the first farmers and the construction of the first megalithic monuments.

Next we devote six of our lectures to the ritual activity that seems to lie at the very core of religion worldwide—namely, burial of the dead, under the theme “Quest for the Afterlife.” Beginning with the simple pit tombs of ordinary villagers in predynastic Egypt, whose bodies were naturally mummified in the dry sand of the Sahara, we move forward in time to the extraordinary graves of wealthy monarchs like the Viking queen Åsa, whose elaborate, treasure-filled

tomb shows that at least some of our ancestors believed that you can take it with you. We also examine ambitious funeral architecture from Petra in Jordan to Easter Island in the Pacific and include a visit to the enigmatic burial mounds of prehistoric North America.

Another universal element in religion is ritual: the performance of traditional actions that range from dances to foretelling the future. Although such activities may seem ephemeral, they often leave clear traces in the archaeological record. Our third theme, "Reconstructing Ancient Rituals," starts with a survey of the fertility cults of warriors and farmers in Bronze Age Scandinavia. Then we move on to Minoan bull dancing, Chinese and Greek divination, and Mayan ball games and human sacrifices. We conclude by examining a tour de force of scientific archaeology that has reconstructed, hour by hour, the last day in the life of a Celtic prince, possibly a Druid, who was sacrificed and buried in a bog at the time of the Roman conquest of Britain.

This grisly ritual leads us into our fourth theme, "Lost Gods and Fallen Temples," where human sacrifice becomes almost routine as part of the nearly superhuman efforts to glorify divine monarchs through monumental architecture, impressive ceremony, and above all spectacular funeral rites. The kings and queens of Ur in Mesopotamia (hometown of the biblical Abraham), the pharaohs of Egypt, the emperors of China and Rome, and the royalty of the ancient Americas have all left indelible marks of their status as gods, rather than as mere mortals.

The penultimate theme of the course, "Sacred Landscapes," offers a tour of some of earth's most famous ancient sites: Stonehenge, Angkor Wat, Machu Picchu, and others. These great achievements of ancient engineers in fact functioned as ceremonial centers, and it is our mission to understand the full range of remains at each site and to reconstruct the religious beliefs and worldviews that impelled ancient peoples in every corner of the globe to invest such vast expenditures of time, wealth, human power, and technical ingenuity to create stages for their religious rites and earthly images of the sacred cosmos. We also explore lesser-known ceremonial centers such as Chaco Canyon in the American Southwest and the Ajanta Caves of India.

In our final group of six lectures, under the theme "Communities of the Spirit," we consider a number of extinct religions in their totality.

The best known of these is unquestionably the early monotheistic cult of the heretic Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaten, who closed the temples of Ra and the other traditional gods and tried to impose the worship of a single god, Aten, throughout his kingdom. Similar grandeur attends the discoveries of the center for Aztec religious life at the Templo Mayor in Mexico City (formerly the Aztec city of Tenochtitlán), where recent excavations have brought to light a series of pyramids, offerings, and artworks that span the entire period of Aztec domination in Mesoamerica. The search for the ancient Persian cult of Mithras takes us deep underground to the buried chapels of his worshippers throughout the Roman Empire, while the city of Jenne-jeno in Africa yields evidence of a cult in which craftworkers, specifically ironsmiths, were regarded as diviners and religious leaders. Finally, viewing earth from space, we close with the mystery of the Nazca Desert in Peru, where gigantic images of animals and other designs laid out over great distances still defy the efforts of archaeologists to unlock their secrets.

Although this course focuses primarily on religions that belong to the ancient world, we will often pause to consider how archaeological finds shed unexpected light on the origins and rituals of such modern religions as Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. Even today, most people's religious experience is shaped not by theological creeds but by enduring traditions rooted in the remote past.

## Lecture Twenty-Five

### Celestial Gateway at Giza

#### Scope:

The most famous archaeological monuments on earth, the Great Pyramid and the Great Sphinx, are in reality components of an immense religious complex laid out on the Giza plateau between the west bank of the Nile River and the Sahara Desert. Developed by pharaohs of the Old Kingdom in the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium B.C., the site included processional ways, temples, entire ships buried in rock-cut pits, a city of workmen, and the tombs of hundreds of people attached to the pharaoh as family members or members of the court. The complex was so vast that it became, like Carnac, a place of sacred geography, where an entire landscape seemed to create a mystical place where the human and divine worlds could meet and interact. Details of the beliefs concerning the journeys made by the pharaohs and other Egyptians after death can be reconstructed from surviving copies of the Book of the Dead.

#### Outline

- I. In the fifth section of our course, we tackle the subject of sacred landscapes.
  - A. We begin on the west bank of the Nile River in Egypt.
  - B. Between the paws of the 4,500-year-old Great Sphinx lies a stone stele, which bears a record of an extraordinary encounter between a pharaoh and a god.
  - C. As a prince, Tutmosis III had practiced his chariot skills at the Giza plateau and dreamed that the Sphinx talked to him.
    1. It identified itself as a god, Horus, son of Isis and Osiris.
    2. Horus said that he was buried, and if Tutmosis would bring him back to the light of day, he would reward the prince by making him king.
  - D. Tutmosis was wrong about the identity of the Sphinx; he was looking at the face of the second pyramid builder, Khafre.
  - E. In the Sphinx we see a sacred landscape because the Sphinx is more than a gigantic sculpture; it is a natural land form.
    1. The builders took a lion-shaped mass of stone and sculpted it into a long body and rising headpiece.

2. The forepart was sculpted to form the face of Khafre; the forepaws, back paws, and tail were added with masonry.
- F. The Giza Plateau is the most famous pyramid site in the world.
  1. It was not the first pyramid site; the first pharaohs built theirs at Saqqara.
  2. Khufu decided to build his in Giza, and his son and grandson added the other two pyramids to the plateau.
- G. In considering this gigantic gateway they created, we enter the world of sacred landscapes.
- II. To understand the pyramids, we need to ask what the Egyptians believed would happen after death.
  - A. Egyptians looked on this life as a very short period that led to an eternity of existence on the other side.
    1. They felt that within their own bodies were multiple souls that must be attended to in different ways to survive the journey to the underground world, the Duat.
    2. Pharaohs had to go through that too if they were to successfully join the god Ra in his sun boat.
  - B. Because the afterlife is a journey, it seemed natural to create a gateway where that journey could begin: Giza.
- III. Khufu decided to create a pyramid that would dominate all of the views from the river.
  - A. His pyramid was the center of a gigantic complex.
  - B. There were temples to the dead pharaoh, small pyramids for the pharaoh's wives, tombs for court officers and nobility, the priests' dwellings, and storehouses for offerings.
  - C. Around the perimeter of the pyramid were enormous riverboats the pharaoh had used in life that would now carry him through the underworld to join Ra on his solar boat.
  - D. An important smaller pyramid here was the pyramid of the pharaoh's ka.
    1. The ka is the part of the spirit that stays with the body after death.
    2. The ka must be nourished and will keep the dead person alive as long as the living are performing the correct rituals.

- E. When Khafre, Khufu's son, built his pyramid, it was placed on high ground, so that the two structures appear to be a pair of matched triangles against the horizon.
  - F. The sphinx, a traditional gate guardian in Egyptian iconography, stands guard by the causeway between the two pyramids.
  - G. A third pyramid completes the landscape.
- IV. The complexity of the thought of the pyramid builders even went beyond this.
- A. The Great Pyramid of Khufu is pierced by two angled shafts: one from the north face, the other from the south.
  - B. Cultural astronomers have studied those shafts.
    - 1. Through the north-facing shaft, you can see the pole star.
    - 2. Through the south-facing shaft, you can see Orion, or Osiris to the Egyptians, at its highest point.
    - 3. Menkaure's pyramid may have been placed to complete the site's resemblance to the line of three bright stars in the belt of Osiris, so the ground mirrors the sky.
  - C. Egypt's chief archaeologist, Zahi Hawass, has sent robots up other shafts inside the pyramid to see what lies at their ends.
    - 1. One of the blind shafts had so many turns that the robot had to be called back.
    - 2. The other one came to a door and behind it found another stone door.
    - 3. What lies behind the second door is a mystery, reminding us that we are only at the beginning of our investigations.

### Suggested Reading:

Lehner, *The Complete Pyramids*.

### Questions to Consider:

- 1. What do you consider to be the greatest mystery concerning the pyramids at Giza?
- 2. Are such sacred landscapes still being created in the world today?

## Lecture Twenty-Five—Transcript

### Celestial Gateway at Giza

Welcome to the fifth part of our course as we tackle the subject of sacred landscapes. Archaeological complexes so vast that they seem to run right to the horizon and create a sacred world here in the middle of our ordinary everyday lives. Over the past couple of lectures we have been visiting some rivers, the Mississippi River at Cahokia, the Urubamba River in Peru with Machu Picchu. Now, we go to what is perhaps the most famous river on earth, a mighty sacred stream that made the nation of Egypt, the River Nile, running from equatorial Africa, north through the deserts, all the way to the Mediterranean Sea.

If you had visited any time over the past 4,500 hundred years, the stretch of the Nile River just before it splits into that rich lush area, known as the Delta, where it slows down its pace and begins to drop the sediments to form the rich agricultural soil of Egypt. Right there near where the ancient Egyptians had their capital at Memphis, on the left-hand side of the river, the West Bank of the river, as I said any time over the last 4,500 years, you would have been looking at one of the largest sculptures ever created in human history, the one known to us all as the Great Sphinx. The Great Sphinx presents us with the head of a man and the body of a lion. It is a commanding figure, seen from the front, and today there is a stone tablet or stele between its paws. In the 1480s B.C. when the Sphinx was already a thousand years old, that stele, that tablet was not present. It was set up by a pharaoh who came to the throne in 1479 B.C. with a record of an amazing dream, with the record of an extraordinary encounter with a god that took place in the shadow of this Great Sphinx, 1,000 years after it was sculpted.

This young man was a prince of Egypt. He was of the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty. He was a long way from the throne, although his father was the pharaoh, there was no indication that he was going to inherit that office himself. He was preparing himself for a life as a military leader. This was the age when the chariot was first being introduced to Egypt from the Near East, where the idea of harnessing these horses to a war carriage had developed up there in the land of the Hittites and other kings. This young prince of Egypt—we might as well give him his name—Tutmosis, had decided to perfect himself in this new military technique, but he did not want people watching



him. He took his horses and his chariot out into a lonely and deserted spot where nobody went anymore, the Giza Plateau.

It was dominated, of course, by three great pyramids and this head that stuck up out of the windblown sand and faced out toward the Nile River. In this area of sand and rock Tutmosis not only went hunting, but he would practice his chariot skills, learning to wrap the reins around his waist and guide the horses by twisting and turning and throwing his weapons or shooting his arrows. He got tired one day, out there all alone. He looked around for some shade, and he saw that the westerling sun was casting a shadow from the great head that looked cool and inviting. He tied up the horses and went over and laid down in this shade. As he drifted into sleep, he—very much in the manner of Pachacuti, the Inca hearing from the great god Inti—he had a dream in which a giant supernatural being appeared. It was the being above him, behind him. It was the Sphinx talking, and it identified itself as a god with a certain aspect. The god was Horus, son of Isis and Osiris, the god who was embodied in every Egyptian pharaoh. This Horus figure, whose emblem was the hawk, was believed by Tutmosis and the Egyptians of his time, to be the original, whose portrait was presented in that Sphinx. Horus of the horizon spoke to young Tutmosis and said that he was buried, his whole body was hidden by the sand. If Tutmosis would dig and uncover his body, bring him back to the light of day, he would reward the prince by making him king. Tutmosis awoke. He returned to his father's court. He obtained permission to do this piece of archaeological conservation work on the Sphinx, uncover it, restore it, and he wrote the whole story of his dream and of the promise of the Sphinx on the tablet that one sees today between the outstretched paws of this famous statue.

Tutmosis was wrong about the identity of the Sphinx. But that just shows that the pharaohs, his predecessors, who 1,000 years earlier had built those three pyramids behind the Sphinx had utterly failed in their dream of maintaining their identities and their presence in the memories, in the hearts, and in the living presence of later Egyptians. They had been pretty much forgotten. Because he was in fact looking at the head, not of Horus, but of the second of the pyramid builders. A pharaoh that we call Khafre (the Greeks called him Khafren) and the Sphinx was his image. In this Sphinx we see glimmerings of our theme of a sacred landscape, because the Sphinx is more than just a gigantic sculpture. Looked at from the front, from head on, which is

the standard way of looking at the Sphinx, it appears to be a lion figure, a crouching lion with four paws stretched out in a normal perspective, with the head rearing up and where you would expect the lion's head to be with the mane, there is the pharaoh with his flaring headdress. If we look at this Sphinx from the side, we can see a very different figure. Unnaturally elongated, covering a vast amount of land. What is the explanation of this? The explanation is that the Sphinx is, for the most part, a natural land form.

Those fourth-dynasty architects and sculptors, who created the pyramids, took what was already a lion-shaped mass of stone, sculpted by the wind and by the scouring effect of the sand, driven into what was originally a little gully, swirling around some soft stone and ultimately sculpting it into a long body, a sort of rising headpiece. The forepart of which was sculpted to form the face of King Khafre, the second great pyramid builder. The outstretched paws, both forepaws and back paws, the tail section, those were added later, of masonry. At its heart, we are looking at a piece of nature that seemed already to be a lion in the rock.

The Giza Plateau is the most famous pyramid site in the world. It may be the most famous archaeological site in the world. The Giza Plateau was not the original site of pyramids. The first Egyptian pharaohs to make mortuary monuments for themselves in the shape of great artificial prisms or mountains of stone, built theirs at another place near Memphis, a place called Saqqara. There the pyramid form was perfected, going from stepped pyramids of a design that we have seen in other parts of the world, especially the New World, to that smooth prismatic surface and form that we are familiar with from the three monumental pyramids at Giza, built in the 75 years after 2550 B.C., about a thousand years before Tutmosis had his dream.

I want to end with Tutmosis before we go back and pick up the pyramid builders, disappointed though they would have been that their memories had not lingered clearly enough for him to know, whose face was upon the Sphinx. Tutmosis did go on to become pharaoh, just as the voice in the dream had promised. He became known as Tutmosis III, and he is the great-great-grandfather of our religious reformer and monotheist Akhenaten whom we visited in an earlier part of the course.

Back to Giza. The pharaoh who decided to move from Saqqara to the Giza Plateau is the pharaoh who built the first and the greatest of the

pyramids at Giza. 2550 is about the start of his reign, and he is the Pharaoh Khufu or in the Greek form, Cheops, but we will be calling him Khufu. He is the one who brought this already perfected technique of building these artificial mountains of stone blocks, and he put it on this Giza Plateau and he was followed in turn by his son and his grandson, Menkaure, who added the other two pyramids to the plateau. When Tutmosis went there in the 1480s B.C., a thousand years after the pyramids were built, it was a wilderness. It was a desert of rock and sand. Certainly, visitors who go today from modern Cairo, leave behind them bustling city and then leave behind them the strip of green land along the Nile River itself, and they enter that desert, that wasteland, that seemingly dead land to which the pyramids belong. That was not the way they were meant to be. That was certainly not the way that Cheops or Khufu, Khefren, Khafre, or Menkaure thought that this landscape would be. They had instead laid out a landscape that was intended to be full of life and activity on the most grand and spectacular scale every day for eternity with the desert, the land of the dead mysteriously beyond it.

It is in considering this gigantic gateway that they created that we are going to enter into our world of sacred landscapes. We will be looking at other very familiar sites like Stonehenge, like Angkor, Chaco Canyon in the American Southwest, Easter Island, but supreme among these is the Giza Plateau. We are not going to be considering certain questions which always seem to crop up when you talk about pyramids. How many blocks are in them? How long did it take to build them? How exactly were they constructed? Did aliens from other planets have anything to do with it? None of these questions is going to concern us. Certain very important archaeological discoveries, like the entire town of the work crews that toiled to raise the pyramids block by block, not our subject. What we are looking at, is a reconstruction of the religious ideas that led to the building of the pyramids, of the overarching plan that fitted them into a landscape that spoke very clearly, that had meaning for people of the 4<sup>th</sup> dynasty back there in the 2500s and 2400s B.C.

This is all about a king who is also a god. We have seen that before now, around the world and in different times and places where rulers are not merely intermediaries between ordinary people like us and the world of the divine, but actually seem to be part of that divine world, gods on earth. We will encounter it if we look through the pages of history books with the Roman emperors. We have already

had other examples that we have seen, the Great Sun of the Natchez, seems to have been a god in his own right and treated as supernatural; so too with the pharaohs Egypt. As I have already told you the god that they are identified with is Horus, the hawk; Horus the sun of Isis and Osiris, the divine couple. Each pharaoh in turn plays that role. To understand the pyramids we need first to ask what did Egyptians believe would happen after death. We touched upon this with Akhenaten, we remember that one of the outrages that he visited upon the entire nation of the Egyptians was that under his new religion, his religion devoted to that rather abstract god Aten, the Sun Disk, only the pharaoh and his family were gods and would go to the next world to join the gods. Other people would remain in their tombs. This was not the belief of the builders of the pyramids. This was not the belief of average Egyptians, throughout the three millennia of Egypt's glory.

On the contrary, Egyptians looked on this life as a very short period that led to an eternity of existence on the other side. They felt that within their own bodies were multiple souls and that these must be attended to in different ways if the essence of the person was to survive that long journey and voyage by river and over land in this underground world that we encountered with the Akhenaten lecture, the Duat, or it can also be spelled D-U-A-D, that river of death, that horrible land of ordeals and dangers that lies beneath the surface of the world. Pharaohs have to go through that too if they are to successfully rise into the sky, join the god Ra, in his sun boat, which sails across the heaven, sinks beneath the western horizon and then traverses the underside of the world to the east to rise again every dawn. It was a drama. It was a drama for eternity, but it was a drama also played out every day, and it was a drama played out again every time each Egyptian died, except during the time of that heretic, that rebel, Akhenaten, who wanted to rob people of this fantastic expectation.

Given that idea that the afterlife is a journey, and that it is a time of passing from this world to a place where you join the gods, it seemed natural, perhaps, to create a gateway where that journey could be seen as beginning. Giza is that gateway, that high arid plateau whose own rock provided the building stones for the pyramids, whose own rock provided the body of the Sphinx. The pyramids were later sheathed in harder stone from quarries elsewhere in Egypt. Giza was to be the setting, chosen by Khufu, the builder of the first pyramid and his architects, the first pyramid at Giza, for this spectacular

gateway. Here we come to the idea that that pyramid form embodies. The pyramid form is one of the signs used for the sun. The sun dies every day. Where does it die? In the west on the western horizon.

If you are in a boat on the Nile River, and most traffic in Egypt flowed not on roads on the bank, but up and down the river in boats. If you are in the area of Memphis and you want to watch the setting sun, it goes down if you are facing out toward the sea with your boat, downstream, it is going down on your left hand. It is going down on the western horizon. It is also the area of the great desert. The Sahara is out there with all of its aridity and its strange rock forms and its shifting dunes. That is the ultimate land of the dead. There is a narrow strip along the river that is the land of life, so anything built above that strip is on that liminal zone. "Liminal" means something of the threshold; it is from that old Latin noun, *limen*, a threshold. It is a liminal place the Giza Plateau because it is front edge comes right down to the Nile River. In the annual flooding of the river, which has now been disrupted by the building of the Aswan Dam, the lower slopes were coated with that rich mud, which in other parts was farmed and allowed to create the rich soil of Egypt that produced such abundance of grain. Egypt was a breadbasket for the ancient world. The people themselves called Egypt the black land because of this rich black earth laid down by each year's flood.

Giza lies at the liminal zone between the black earth and the desert, the land of the dead and that western horizon. We cannot be positive exactly how Khufu, the first of the three pyramid builders, envisioned the whole thing turning out. He decided to create a pyramid in the shape of that triangular sun symbol with smooth side where it would dominate all the views from the river as one passed down toward the Delta and the sea. The Sphinx was not there yet, but what we have to remember is that his pyramid was the center of a gigantic complex—an immense tract of land with the great stone pyramid at its heart—and this will be true of the second and third pyramids built there, as well. That walled enclosure is then linked to the riverside by a causeway, a great stone highway for processions where people could come from Memphis, the capital, in boats, dock at the bottom of the causeway and then have processions up the causeway to the great gates of the enclosure.

That of course is how the funeral happened for Cheops. He and his sarcophagus, all of his paraphernalia and trappings and grave

goods—we do not know what they were because the tomb was looted long ago—they all went in a royal parade up that causeway. What do you see? Temples. What is going on in the temples? Every day through eternity Egyptians, priests, people who revered the pharaoh were supposed to be in those temples remembering the dead pharaoh, praising him, leaving offerings to him, keeping his memory alive. His was not the only pyramid. There were multiple small pyramids for his wives. There was an area of tombs where officers of the court and nobility had places of their burial near the king. Some of these subsidiary tombs were incredibly richly furnished. One of his wives had an entire sort of pavilion with the pergola that went over her and the couches and the beautiful engraved chairs in there, truly the idea that you will need to be furnished in eternity with everything you enjoyed on this earth.

Then you would find in addition to all this the dwelling places of the priests, storehouses for offerings and, around the perimeter of the pyramid, something that had appeared in some of the earliest Pharaonic tombs, way back in the early dynasties when they simply made little mastabas, sort of low-level complexes of many chambers and niches for the pharaoh's remains. You would have found boats, enormous river-going boats, but the largest one that we have ever found is in a pit by the great pyramid of Khufu. This elongated pit held in 1,200 pieces, all disassembled, a boat made of cedar of Lebanon. So although the boat itself was made to glide on the Nile, it implies the existence of seagoing craft that were going up to Lebanon, bringing back these wonderful cedars. The boat, 142 feet long, when it was all reassembled, in life had carried the pharaoh on the river. In death it would carry him through that mysterious space between this world and the place where he could join the boat of Ra and join Ra and the other gods in the true ship of all, the solar boat that carried the sun under the world and back to its place in the east to rise each day. The boats themselves were placed there. And one has been excavated. There are several other pits. And they still have their boats inside and will be archaeological discoveries for the future.

Here was this place of festivity, of praise, of liveliness, of processions. Not just on the day of the funeral, but repeated through time immemorial in the pharaoh's fond imagination, keeping his memory alive forever. There is one more very important little pyramid here. It is the pyramid of the pharaoh's ka, K-A. The ka is the part of the spirit that stays in place where the body is. Offerings

are made to the ka. The ka must be looked after. The ka must be nourished through memory, through prayer and praise and visitations and through these offerings of food and drink that will keep the dead person alive as long as the living are performing the correct rituals. Khufu died. He was placed in his pyramid. There was now a sort of a lonely marker stone there on the Giza Plateau but with this gigantic, almost city-sized complex around it, which during that time certainly through the lifetime of his son and his grandson, buzzed with life every day as this immense amount of tribute, offering, sacrifices, were brought up into the temple area. All those ceremonies were held in the king's memory.

When Khafre, the son, built his pyramid, it was sited in such a place that when you were down on the river and looked up, even though Khafre's was shorter and smaller, it was placed high, with the aesthetic view and I think a religious symbolism of getting the two to appear to be a pair of matched triangles against the horizon with their summits at the same level. This is what really created that gateway. The Sphinx, this lion, with the head of a human being, the head of the pharaoh, is a traditional gate guardian in Egyptian iconography. It is similar to the griffins that we see among other peoples, those lions plus eagle figures that we saw in either side of the throne for instance in the palace at Knossos on Crete that was uncovered by Sir Arthur Evans. The function of the Sphinx is to guard the gate. It is not just the gate to the compound that was built around the great pyramid of Khafre, it is guarding the causeway that goes up, and it is guarding the place in between the two which is the gateway to the next world, through the which the pharaoh is going to be passing.

The third pyramid completed the three. It also has the causeway. It comes down to a place near the Sphinx. The Sphinx provides this sense of entrance and of a protective supernatural guardian being who is looking after all three pyramids, all three causeways, all three great bustling city-like ceremonial centers with their temples and their continual cult and worship, [and] the spaces between the pyramids, now, those gates to the west, those gates to the afterlife.

The complexity of the thought of the pyramid builders even went beyond this. Inside the great pyramid there are shafts. They look like air shafts if you see cross sections of it that go from some of the chambers out toward the surface of the great stone monument. They exist in some of the other pyramids, also, these shafts. They angle up

from the chambers. Different names have been given in modern times to various chambers: queen's chamber, king's chamber, and so on. We do not need to worry about any of those except to say that from one chamber within the great pyramid of Khufu, one angled shaft went up to the north face of the pyramid. This pyramid, as with our great mound at Cahokia, faces very precisely the cardinal points, north, south, east, west. Facing that, from the same chamber another was the entrance to another shaft angling up to the south wall. Astronomers in this field called archaeoastronomy, cultural astronomy that we will be exploring, as I said earlier, once we get to our Nazca lines in Peru, which really are the ultimate expression of this. They have been studying what you could see through those shafts. It appears if you were standing in the chamber and looked out through the north-facing shaft, you would have seen the one star that does not move, the pole star which, in about 2500 B.C., would have been located just in your line of sight at the end of that shaft, the whole of the heavens revolving around it. What was at the end of the other shaft?

Here you saw, on the day of the year when the constellation we call Orion was at its highest point in the heavens, you would have seen the belt of Orion passing in front of that little square space where you saw the night sky from the interior of the pyramid. We call this constellation Orion, they called it Osiris, the king of the gods, the father of Horus. And there is a belief that Menkaure's pyramid, a modern belief, a modern theory, completed on the stretch of the Giza Plateau, the line of three bright stars that are in the belt of Orion or as the Egyptians would have seen it the belt or girdle of Osiris. What was on the ground became a mirror for that celestial pageant that was up in the sky. There are other shafts within the pyramids, whose true purpose has not been discovered. Some of them never make it all the way to the outside of the pyramid shell, therefore may have had a purely symbolic value (just to give you a sense of how much more we still have to learn about this extraordinary world centered around these three monuments, this sort of cosmos of meanings and ideas and arcane lore).

The chief archaeologist of Egypt, Zahi Hawass, continues the traditions of investigation and archaeological work there. He has sent robots up the shafts, the blind shafts, to try to see what lies at their ends. On one of the blind shafts there were so many turns the robot couldn't negotiate the bends and had to be called back. The other one

came to a door with two copper handles. The robot was called back, fitted with a drill that could be operated remotely, sent back up the shaft, and it drilled through that stone door and found another stone door. What lies behind it is a mystery and reminds us that we are still only at the beginning of teasing out of the landscape at Giza, out of the relationships between the pyramids, out of the symbolism that embraces the pyramids and the Sphinx and the art of ancient Egypt. We are still at the beginnings of trying to understand what is, after all these millennia, still the most intriguing and, in many ways, the most remarkable site ever created by human engineering, science, and religious fervor.

## Lecture Twenty-Six

### Cosmic Hub at Stonehenge

#### Scope:

Stonehenge in southern England ranks with its contemporary monuments at Giza as among the most famous archaeological sites on earth. Both were constructed by Bronze Age civilizations in the mid-3<sup>rd</sup> millennium B.C. The ring of “hanging stones” on Salisbury Plain, however, is far more enigmatic than the pyramids or the Great Sphinx. The only ancient testimony to its purpose comes from ancient Greek geographers, who referred to it as a temple to the sun. This claim was ignored by early British antiquarians, who saw in Stonehenge a work of the Celtic Druids. In 1965, Gerald Hawkins used a computer to “decode” Stonehenge as an astronomical observatory so sophisticated that it could predict eclipses. Archaeology has shown that no single theory can explain Stonehenge. The monument evolved over more than a thousand years and was the center of a vast sacred landscape of earthworks, burials, and trackways spread widely across the plain.

#### Outline

- I. In this lecture, we travel to Britain to visit Stonehenge on Salisbury Plain.
  - A. Because there are no written records by its makers, Stonehenge presents even more of a puzzle than usual.
  - B. Stonehenge is somewhat tied into the megalithic movement, but it is different.
    1. Many of the blocks are not megalithic.
    2. They are fitted together with mortise and tenon joints.
    3. There is no precedent for the circle of slabs united by capstones and lintels into a smooth circle.
    4. Stonehenge is not about burials.
  - C. Let us look at the plain around Stonehenge, which is our second example of a sacred landscape, to put Stonehenge into the context of the religious monuments that once surrounded it and see if we can reconstruct the religious ideas that propelled its makers.

## II. Stonehenge, as a site, spans about 1,500 years of creation.

- A. In about 3200 B.C., people living on Salisbury Plain created a circular trench and then piled up the soil to form a great ring-shaped wall larger than the later stone circle.
- B. For about 700 years, people added things, mainly earth mounds at various places within that circle and giant wooden posts set into the mound.
- C. Around 2500 B.C. and for the 200 years following, Stonehenge became a building site.
  1. The nearer source of the stones is at the Marlboro Downs; these are called sarsen stones.
  2. The other stones are from 250 miles away in southwest Wales; these are called bluestones.
  3. Getting these stones to this site was an extraordinary effort, and we have to assume that there was extraordinary religious fervor behind it.
- D. The bluestones went up first, and they created a circle, or maybe a pair of concentric circles.
- E. Perhaps the site's ultimate meaning was in the building of it. People may have come together at certain times of the year and pour all of their effort into moving these stones.

## III. What would we have seen at this site around 2300 B.C.?

- A. If you approached Stonehenge from the Avon, you would see a gate, the entrance into the stone circle.
- B. Up close, the upright sarsen stones were roughly oblong but still showed a lot of natural contours, which was not true of the lintel stones on top.
- C. Although the ground was not level, the lintel stones are.
- D. You would have seen bumps and a few carvings on top of the lintel directly above you, marking it as the entrance.
- E. Within the ring was a horseshoe of five trilithons, like monumental gateways.
- F. Beyond the ring of stones was an expanse of flat earth with circles of offering pits, dug with picks made from antlers.

## IV. Many have tried to understand the meaning of Stonehenge.

- A. The Greek writer Diodorus Siculus calls Stonehenge a temple to Apollo, indicating a connection to sun worship.

- B. Medieval chronicler Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote that Stonehenge in his day was a place of healing.
  1. People came and poured water over the bluestones, washed themselves, and were cured.
  2. It was also believed in the Middle Ages and later that Druids built Stonehenge; they did not, though they did use it for sacrifices and rituals.
- C. In 1963, Gerald Hawkins claimed that Stonehenge was a gigantic astronomical observatory. We no longer think this, though Stonehenge has an element of orientation to the sun.
- D. A new theory goes back to Geoffrey of Monmouth's idea, that it is a place of healing.
  1. British archaeologists studied the quarry site in the Preseli Mountains of Wales and studied the bluestones there.
  2. They found that there were rings of bluestones from antiquity, like mini-Stonehenges.
  3. People may have brought the bluestones to Salisbury as if transporting their sacredness.
  4. Dammed up pools at Salisbury suggest that it might have been in itself a place of healing.
  5. Archaeologists found the body of an ill individual from central Europe buried nearby, which fits this new theory.
- V. Stonehenge reminds us that any of these gigantic sacred landscapes might have multiple meanings and that, however far we go with archaeology, some of the core of the religious belief around them is likely to remain just out of reach.

### Suggested Reading:

Chippindale, *Stonehenge Complete*.

Hawkins and Allen, *Stonehenge*.

### Questions to Consider:

1. Stonehenge has been called unique. In your view, what features of the monument justify such a claim?
2. What rituals and forms of worship can you picture being celebrated at Stonehenge?

## Lecture Twenty-Six—Transcript

### Cosmic Hub at Stonehenge

Welcome back. Last time, we were on the banks of the Nile with the pyramids of Giza. Today, we travel north and west to the island of Britain and that great site of Stonehenge. We remarked on the fact that even a prince of the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty could have been unaware that he was within a sacred landscape when he was at Giza. The same thing is certainly true for the Salisbury Plain around Stonehenge. The gigantic stone monuments still dominate. The pyramids and Sphinx in Egypt, and the familiar circle of stones that we call Stonehenge, out there in the middle of the Salisbury Plain. Just as the vast funerary complexes that gave sense and meaning and life to the religious ideas surrounding the Giza Plateau, just as those vanished through time, so [too], hidden beneath the Salisbury Plain today, are the many other monuments—the causeways, the camps for seasonal visitors, groups who came to celebrate rituals at certain times of the year at Stonehenge, the other monuments, many of them long earth walls or mounds (one even so long a pair of walls, it's called the Cursus (it looks like a racecourse)—all of this has sort of dropped out of sight, leaving just an enigmatic, giant circle of stones, there at Stonehenge, presenting even more of a puzzle than we faced with Egypt because in the case of the Egyptian pyramids, there were, in fact, many texts, historical records, a wealth of iconography to guide us in understanding the ideas and the religious motives of the people who created that site.

That is not true of Stonehenge. Unlike the pyramids where we have an evolution and can trace it through dynasty after dynasty as the idea of a pyramid complex evolves, grows, tapers off, we can see precedence and so on, Stonehenge is, in some ways, unique. Yes, it does tie into that great megalithic movement that we celebrated in Lecture Six, looking at Atlantic Europe and the Neolithic and all of those gigantic stone monuments left by those farmers, but Stonehenge is different. In Stonehenge many of the blocks are not megalithic, rough, natural boulders hauled into place. They are carefully dressed. They are fitted together with mortises and tenons that almost look like they came out of woodworking or carpentry tradition. Although there were circles of standing stones back in the Neolithic, there is nothing like the circle of slabs with those capstones, those lintel stones, uniting them in a smooth circle on top

to really give us a precedent for what we see at Stonehenge within the world of the megalithic monument builders.

Also, Stonehenge is very patently not about burials. Many of our sites, and specifically our megalithic sites, were celebrations of honored ancestors, houses for the dead, monuments that took the place of a dead person, more or less, stood for them through eternity in the landscape, commemorating their greatness, their spirit, the love and respect that their contemporaries or their families felt for them. Stonehenge does not mean that. Certainly, it does not, judging from the remains that are found inside. Let us look at this monument. Let us look at the plain around it, which is our second example of a sacred landscape, most of which has been obliterated in terms of going and seeing it today. Its roots and traces still lie beneath the ground, and let us see if we cannot put this ultra-famous stone circle back into the context of the religious monuments that once surrounded it and try to reconstruct the religious ideas that propelled its makers sometime between the years 2500 and 2300 B.C., about the same time that the fourth dynasty in Egypt was creating the pyramids. At about that same time, these stone masters up there on the Salisbury Plain in England were creating an enduring monument. In some ways, it rivals the pyramids for interest and mastery of the material of moving gigantic blocks of stone.

Stonehenge, as a site, spans about 1,500 years of creation, starting from about 3200 B.C. right back there in the Neolithic period and contemporary (if you remember our discussions of some megalithic) Neolithic sites such as Newgrange in Ireland, such as some of the sites in Brittany, those tombs through which shafts of light would suddenly penetrate going through a passageway into a central chamber. It is contemporary with those, the very beginnings of Stonehenge. It is also contemporary with the temples of the Mother Goddess on Malta. One of the things that united the artwork around Newgrange in Ireland, the largest of the megalithic tombs in Brittany, and the great stone temples of the Mother Goddess in Malta, is an artistic design, the spiral. It is a motif that we cannot understand. It seems to be a symbol of that cult in the same way that a cross would symbolize Christianity, but we have lost the interpretation. Nonetheless it is about the same time that those great stone structures were going up that people living on the Salisbury Plain in England or in that area created what today is called a henge monument. The name “henge” is borrowed from the back half of

Stonehenge and what it means to a modern archaeologist is people have gone out on to those chalk lands where, if you dig right below the grass and the subsoil, you hit this white chalk. They dig down into it, they dig a circular trench, and then pile up the soil—the substance that was in the excavated trench—to form a great wall also in the shape of a ring, either outside the trench—that is a normal henge monument—or in the case of Stonehenge, inside.

What appears first at Stonehenge? A circle, a circle bigger in its diameter than the circle of stones that is so famous today. But it is still there: The traces of the ring-like wall and at Stonehenge; outside it is the trench in conflict to the norm for henge monuments. But everything at Stonehenge is outside the norm. As the centuries passed for about 700 years, people added things, mainly in terms of mounds heaped up at various places within that circle and giant wooden posts set in the mound. We are back into that world at Cahokia. There was never exactly a wood henge at Stonehenge as far as we can tell, but wood henges did exist back there in the times of the very late Neolithic and the Copper and Bronze Age that is going to take its place around 2500. For instance they, at one point, lengthened one of the runways at Heathrow Airport and found a circle of wooden posts, that is, a wood henge in one of these ring like formations. Something like that may have appeared in Stonehenge but so far all that archaeologists have found are straight lines of posts or individual posts set in mounds.

But they are marking something. What they are not marking consistently is burials. So it is got some meaning other than communicating with the dead or interring the dead with proper respect. Then around 2500, everything changes. For 200 years Stonehenge becomes a building site without rival in European territory. The two sources of stone are very different for the ultimate structure that is going to be created there on the special standing stones and station stones that will mark different points on the horizon of this evolving sacred landscape. The nearby source of the stones is at the Marlboro Downs to the north. It is only about 20 miles away but considering that you are hauling stones that weigh tons each, it is a formidable job to get them there. Many people think that the stones were taken from the Marlboro Downs, where they probably were scattered across the surface of the ground as what's called glacial erratics. Erratic, we think of it for one thing when we're talking about a worker, well what it means in its original sense, from the Latin

*errare*, to wander, is that things have wandered from their original places and were deposited by glaciers in this new spot, already somewhat sculpted, smooth, detached from their parent geological bed and ready for ambitious stone masons of this crossover time between the Neolithic, the Stone Age and the Bronze Age and copper-using time in between. They are ready to be hauled off.

They were probably dragged down to rivers. The River Avon threads its way through this countryside and actually wraps in a big curve around Stonehenge. And the largest of the causeways. (this is very reminiscent of what happened on the Nile) is a road that goes out of Stonehenge and then curves down. It comes out of the northeast axis of Stonehenge—the ring is already there even though the stones are not—[and] curves down to the River Avon. [It] originally, seems to have had a kind of processional way of great standing stones all the way along it to mark its course, and the giant stones that are called sarsen stones. That is a word you will probably only hear in association with Stonehenge. It is the traditional folk term for those gigantic standing stones that the local farmers knew of no parallel to, so they used this word that we cannot even trace for sure the etymology of “sarsen,” to describe these great standing stone slabs. They are dragged up, and they are going to be used in creating the Stonehenge we know.

But there are other stones. Two-hundred-fifty miles away from Stonehenge in southwest Wales is a vast outcrop of what are called blue stones. These are a stone that when they are cut or wet from rain, do have a blue shimmer to them. This area, this quarry area, we are going to come back to toward the end of our lecture because it has been the study area for a couple of British archaeologists who are trying to shed some new light on what these stones might have signified to the people who first used them in Wales, then why they might have been brought over those hundreds of miles to the middle of the Salisbury Plain to form what seemed to be very small and easily overlooked circles and horseshoe shapes within the much more imposing and much more familiar looking circle of standing stones and crosspieces or lintels that make up the more famous profile of Stonehenge. At any rate, it was an extraordinary engineering feat to get 80 of these blue stones from the southwest part of Wales, down from their high hilly place where they were quarried, down to the shore, in to boats, up the River Avon and finally to Stonehenge itself, since some of these weigh several tons a piece, even though they are



much smaller than the big sarsen stones. This is an extraordinary effort. Where we see extraordinary effort, we have to assume extraordinary religious fervor, extraordinary religious meaning behind it, which could only be satisfied with these stones.

As I said, we will come back to Wales in an attempt to understand why that might be. I should say at this point that the moving of the stones seemed a miracle to later people. In the Middle Ages no one could imagine how such stones could have been moved other than by superhuman means. A myth was invented, saying that they had been transported from Ireland by the magician, Merlin, who was, of course, the court wizard for the famous King Arthur. And that he was the one who made the stones float through the air and land on Salisbury Plain. These stones were then erected, these sarsen stones and blue stones. It appears now from digs carried out in 2008, the first dig in many years within the circle of stones at Stonehenge, that the blue stones went up first, and that they created a circle, these 80 blue stones or maybe a pair of concentric circles within the area that we now associate as the ring of stones, giant stones, there at Stonehenge. The people who were creating this monument, they remind me a little of our friends over at Cahokia, who kept in a way tinkering, or for whom perhaps the ultimate meaning was not in the finished product, the finished architectural monument, but rather in the building of it and it was there to be taken down and rearranged and added to. Each time, it was the building. It was the communal effort of raising this thing that was the whole point.

I think of the records that we alluded to when we talk about the megalithic monuments, records from tribal peoples in Madagascar and Borneo and New Guinea, who still raise the great stone monument. The raising of the monument is accompanied by a gigantic feast, and the moving of the stones is incorporated into a sort of competitive, joyous, community effort, sort of we will show them what we can do, combative spirit of hauling these stones over seemingly impossible distances and of a great chief who will provide feasts for the people. Again, reminiscent perhaps a little of our gigantic communal feasts there, with all those deer bones and things we saw at Cahokia. Imagine a kind of, not a solemn, mysterious, misty place out there on the Salisbury Plain, lonely in its own way as the Giza desert is in Egypt in its way; but if we imagine instead, a place of strong sacred meaning to a large number of people out in the countryside, who come together at certain times of the year and pour

all their efforts into moving these stones. Perhaps, we are a little closer to what happened in that two centuries when Stonehenge was evolving and where certainly the blue stones went through a couple of different periods of being arranged in different ways.

Let us talk a little bit about what the final product was there around the year 2300 B.C. when the stone building ceased and then a few centuries of tinkering with ditches and additional posts and so on, here and there, succeeded to the main building phase. What you would have seen if you approached Stonehenge from the River Avon, you would have come up that hillside from the river and gradually there would have come into view, this structure that looked like nothing else on earth. What it does look like is a little bit [like] the interior of that great megalithic tomb at Newgrange in Ireland, which was a circle of big stones, a pair of which had a gap between them. The sun then shone in through that gap (you will remember that from our discussion of Newgrange back in Lecture Six). The kinship is hidden from us because Newgrange has a cap. It has been made into a sort of artificial hill. But at Stonehenge, they are all exposed, and you would have seen ahead of you, like a gate, the entrance into the stone circle. Then there were other gates, other doors, other openings—almost 60 of them—all the way around the ring, doorways leading between these huge uprights that would have allowed you to slip into the circle and certainly allowed light to slip into the circle.

You would have gotten up close, and you would have seen that while the upright sarsen stones were roughly oblong in shape, they still showed a lot of natural contours. That was not true of the lintel stones, the cap stones that ran around the top. In fact, modern surveyors have been up on that ring, which of course is spanning a circle a couple of hundred feet in diameter. Although the ground underneath is not level, so carefully was the measurement done of the rings that they are level. That floating flat ring of stone must somehow have been very important to the builders and to the impression of those who knew what was going on and what the religious meanings were when they visited.

As you enter, and the chief entry point was from the northeast, you would have, if you would been able to climb up there, seen a couple of bumps and a few carvings on top of the lintel directly above you, marking that as the special one. That is the entrance. You are now

suddenly in a space unlike any other on earth. You are being surrounded by a wall of stone, of this grayish yellow stone, the sarsen stones, close enough together that they would give the feeling of an almost continuous boundary. Within there, are the rings or a later version of the horseshoe shape of some of those standing blue stones and then what we call trilithons. These are like monumental gateways, five of them set in a horseshoe shape in the middle, the tallest one down toward the southwest, the axis of the horseshoe pointing toward the way you came in from the causeway that led up from the River Avon. They are like monumental gateways to what? We are not sure. This is something we are going to be exploring in a moment. But that is their form. If you think of the Roman triumphal arch, which does not necessarily pass through a wall or lead to anything, that is kind of the effect of these gigantic trilithons, but so much more elemental in their forms and so much more impressive in their enigmatic refusal to be decorated with art or to be helping us out in any way with inscriptions. I guess this is the point to say that Stonehenge itself gets some of its strength from its bareness, from its simplicity.

There are not artistic representations on this stone such as we found at Malta or Newgrange. We do not have Celtic symbols carved here and there. It is stark and bare and seems to be part of the cosmos that it is perhaps striving to express in its own circular form. The trilithon straight ahead of you is the largest. Its capstone rises above the ring of lintel stones that form the outer circle. We have our flanking ones, a pair on either side, and then the horseshoe of blue stones in the middle. Straight ahead of us is a stone that has been mistakenly thought in modern times, to have been a stone of sacrifice. There is a point in Hardy's novel *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, where poor Tess has wandered across the Salisbury Plain, fallen asleep on a stone and wakes up to find herself on, I think, it is this stone slab, the stone of sacrifice. We now know that is a misnomer. It was an original standing stone, a sort of pointer stone right there in the heart of the whole complex. Outside, beyond the ring of stones, there would have been the expanse of flat earth with other circles in it, circles of pits, some of which have offerings in them, some of which have some of the antler picks that were used by the workers to dig out the original ring trench and were also used to dig the holes into which the great sarsens were tipped as they were raised. As with the Egyptian pyramids, we are not going to be drawn into that endlessly fascinating question of how in the world did they move the stones.

How did they raise them once they got them there? How did they—this is the most amazing thing, to me—how did they get everything leveled to the point where when you had placed the lintels, those flat perfectly dressed and smooth slabs of the sarsen stone material, on top of the ring of standing sarsen stones in order to create the outer circle, how did they level that? Especially when these sarsen stones have at their top two little peak-like nubs that are going to be the tenons that hold the lintels in place, because each lintel has a pair of sockets that fit one on the tenon of the first sarsen and then we'll span the gap and anchor the other end of that lintel to the next stone. All of this complexity, and yet they got a perfect level result. There is the truly incomprehensible marvel to me. None of this is going to concern us. We are just trying to understand what the meaning of this can be.

We should say right now that through time lots of people have been trying to understand the meaning of Stonehenge. Our first record, seemingly comes from a Greek writer named Diodorus Siculus, and that means Diodorus of Sicily, who said that off to the north of the Celtic country there is an island bigger than Sicily, which Britain certainly is, so that seems to be what we are talking about. Britain is also three cornered like Sicily so it would be a natural comparison. On this island, he says, there is a temple and a city dedicated to Apollo. In the days of Diodorus, Apollo is the sun god. On certain nights Apollo comes down and plays his lute. He makes music on the earth. There are people in the city who also make the music, and they go out to the temple, which is spherical, and there they worship the god. Also, this is a place where the moon appears very close to the earth. We seem to have this idea of a spherical temple, something to do with the sun and the moon, a nearby city that is different from the temple site, and people who come to the site in order to celebrate through music and through dance, this god who is the god of the sun, but who certainly in the Greek world, is also the god of musical inspiration. As we saw in early lectures, the god of oracles too.

The Greeks were very fond of equating their gods with the gods of other peoples. We cannot be sure they always got it right or are giving us accurate equivalencies for these other gods but it does seem that there is a strong link between Apollo and the sun at this time that Diodorus is writing. And that would indicate that we are at a place, focused, as so many of our sites have been, Cahokia only one of them, with the sun.

What about that spherical? A Greek is perfectly capable of saying it was a circular temple. Why in the world would Diodorus have said it is spherical? I have to say it is a possibility that we should consider that rising from that perfectly flat ring of lintel stones was in fact a roof. The roof would have looked more like the top of Newgrange tomb, a semispherical or hemispherical rounded mass of earth. At Stonehenge, I think we might imagine that vast timbers were used. Remember, they are cutting down lots of trees to use for the rollers for these stones, and these are farming people, they are clearing the land. There is a great deal of high quality timber to be had at that time in Britain, and that they have constructed perhaps a geodesic dome-like way, a roof over Stonehenge, and that is the point of making those lintels so perfectly level, is to support that roof, that could then be the spherical top. It would echo our lid for Newgrange and of course look forward to the spherical or half spherical form of the Pantheon in Rome that is going to come a couple of millennia later.

Whatever the truth behind it, we do at least have one clue in the Greek story that it may have been roofed. The other reason I think that that seems a possibility is it would make the observation so much more impressive when you were inside if you were looking out at the horizon through slots between stones that gave you a glimpse of the skyline there but you didn't have the whole sky above you. How does this tie in? Well it is going to tie in with an astronomical theory of Stonehenge. We will come to that in moment.

But first let us look at a couple of later ideas. The medieval people produced a chronicler, Geoffrey of Monmouth there in England, who wrote that Stonehenge in his day was a place of healing. He is specifically talking about his day, saying that people came and poured water over the blue stones, washed themselves, and then they were cured. It was also believed in the Middle Ages and later that Druids, our friends from the Celtic world who we talked about before with our bog bodies, that they actually built Stonehenge. We know they did not (they are an Iron Age people) but that they used it for their sacrifices and their rituals. These were all ideas. In 1963, an astronomer named Hawkins published a book claiming that all of Stonehenge was a gigantic astronomical observatory. What did he base this on? It had always been noticed that the northeast orientation meant that if you stood in the middle and looked out through that passageway that you'd entered by, the midsummer sunrise shone right into your face, in the same way that at Newgrange the

midwinter sunrise shone into the heart of the monument. Similarly, if you turned around and looked over that standing stone that used to be called the sacrifice stone, you looked straight out through the trilithon at the other end, and there was the midwinter sunset disappearing out of sight, below the horizon through there.

Hawkins was an astronomer. He believed that this really was an observatory for very early Bronze Age scientists. We no longer think that that is true, but certainly there is an element of the orientation to the sun of viewing the sun as some important thing that is being harnessed or controlled or measured here, expressed in the ring of stones itself and the different placement and orientations that are bestowed upon this monument.

A new theory has gone back to Geoffrey of Monmouth's idea that it is a place of healing. That theory has been worked over by a couple of British archaeologists who went, all credit to them, to the quarry site in the Preseli Hills of Wales, studied the blue stones there, found that there were rings of blue stones from antiquity like mini-Stonehenges there at the site, so that the idea and the cult might have come from the Preseli Mountains to Salisbury with the people who brought the stones as if they were sacred there, and that sacredness was being transported. They saw pools damned up that suggested to them that this might have been, in itself, a place of healing, where one was washed of one's illness. Remember Geoffrey of Monmouth had specifically said, pour water over those stones and you will be cured.

For these archaeologists, who excavated in the main circle at Stonehenge in 2008, and found that the blue stones had already been erected in 2500 B.C., the presence for instance of a very ill individual, an archer, from somewhere in central Europe, judging by isotope analysis, maybe the Swiss Alps, who was found with gold, the oldest gold found in England and all of his equipment and metallurgical materials, things for copper working. The presence of this archer—buried a couple of kilometers from Stonehenge, and a man who seemed to be related to him, a younger man, who might have brought him there because this archer would have been almost crippled from knee problems, in terrible pain from tooth abscesses—[is the basis of] this new theory, new to our age about Stonehenge that it is a place of healing, that this archer would have come all the way from the Swiss Alps to Stonehenge to be cured by those stones,

that had themselves been dragged on this immense journey from southwest Wales to this spot on the Salisbury Plain.

A place of healing, a place of sun worship, a place of communal, joyful gatherings, a place where a vast stone circle was embedded in a landscape of earth mounds, strange walkways and avenues, processional ways down to rivers, Stonehenge is all of these. It reminds us that with any of these gigantic sacred landscapes the meanings were likely to be multiple and that however far we go with archaeology some of the core of the religious belief that surrounded these extraordinary achievements of our ancestors is always likely to remain just out of reach.

## Lecture Twenty-Seven

### Desert Lines at Nazca

#### Scope:

The first antiquities from Nazca to reach 19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe were colorful molded and decorated pottery, now known to date from 500 B.C. to 500 A.D. But the unique element of Nazca culture was not fully appreciated till the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when pilots flying over the remote and bone-dry coastal desert west of Cuzco, Peru saw gigantic line drawings on the bare earth below them—over 100 spiders, hummingbirds, monkeys, and other figures both realistic and abstract. A German mathematician named Maria Reiche devoted her life to recording the fragile lines and protecting them from destruction by curious motorists. The straight lines through the desert may be processional ways such as those still used by nearby highland communities in their ancestor worship. The extraordinary images of animals and plants, however, continue to defy interpretation, although many theories have been published. At 200 square miles, the Nazca desert ranks as the largest sacred landscape ever created.

#### Outline

- I. In this lecture, our site is the Nazca Lines of the Peruvian coastal desert.
  - A. In the 1930s, pilots first noted the enormous etchings on the surface of this landscape.
  - B. Our task is to understand the religious purpose of these images, how they were made, who made them, and what they symbolized to this civilization.
- II. The Nazca civilization arose in about 100 B.C. and lasted until about 750 A.D.
  - A. It had a big ceremonial center with about 40 pyramids and temples, called Cahuachi, home to seasonal and special events.
  - B. Cahuachi was surrounded by a foot and a half tall wall that defines the sacred space.

### III. The pilots who discovered the site saw two types of features.

- A. There are more than 1,000 miles of lines, nodes, and geometric shapes. Each line is usually a few miles in length.
- B. In the southern zone are 30 figures that mostly represent birds.
  1. The figures are outlined, so you can walk all the way around perimeter and never retrace your steps.
  2. This outlining technique gives the Nazca Lines their recognizable artistic and aesthetic profile.
- C. The Nazca Lines were made with the simplest technology ever applied to such stupendous results.
  1. The surface is made of volcanic stone, beneath which is whitish-pink subsoil.
  2. To create a line, you just needed to lift off the rocks to the desired width.
- D. Similar images appear on Nazca pottery, which allows us to link the desert images to the first three quarters of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium A.D.
- E. The Nazca lifestyle, although much grander and more populous at the time the lines were being built, has not changed significantly up to our time.
  1. They farm cotton, various tuber crops, and field crops for sustenance.
  2. They rely on occasional rains and underground seeps.
- F. Maria Reiche, a German mathematician, spent 50 years as a caretaker and advocate of the lines, promoting their protection and study.

### IV. To understand these lines, we have to use the clues embedded in the lines themselves and know how these people related to their environment.

- A. Early on, people thought of astronomical links.
  1. The zanier end included theories about aliens.
  2. The more valid idea was that people were looking at the stars and trying to represent them in the desert.
  3. Reiche championed the idea that these lines represent constellations.

- B. Gerald Hawkins ran a map of the Nazca Desert through a computer to try to find patterns in the risings and settings of stars and constellations at various times of the year.
  1. He deduced that there were no consistent patterns.
  2. On the strength of his reputation, people began to dismiss the astronomical link.
  3. Hawkins has been criticized for overlooking that within the tropics there are days when the sun stands directly overhead.
- C. Anthony Aveni and his team did some of the first serious work on the ground.
  1. The nodes from which the lines radiate are on little hills, so that when you climbed to the top of one, you had sight lines to the horizon.
  2. They also found that the lines formed a network of continuous interlacing that spanned the pampa between the two populated and farmed river valleys.
  3. You begin to get the sense of a system: The dry land between the two populated areas is a spiritual zone crossed by lines radiating from fixed, important points.
- D. Aveni also used a computer and a map of the desert to draw some conclusions.
  1. They erased anything that was not a straight line.
  2. They found a cluster that pointed at the place on the horizon where the sun would come up around November 1, when the sun is in zenith.
  3. November 1 is also the beginning of the rainy season for Nazca farmers.

### V. We do not know what the Nazca might have believed.

- A. Whether the animal figures were constellations, as Reiche believed, is still open to question.
- B. Aveni certainly created a very strong case for the idea that water and solar magic were put together to fuel the resurrection of the new year.
- C. Aveni was also interested in those trapezoidal and triangular figures.
  1. They seemed to be charting underground water sources passing through the desert.
  2. They are like a sacred or symbolic grid.

VI. You can walk the lines in the same way that modern people at a religious site walk a labyrinth.

- A. Nearby modern Andean tribes make walking tours, pilgrimages, and sacred hikes part of their religious experience.
- B. Indeed, it may be that at Nazca, the art was truly meant to be experienced by walking through it.
- C. The Nazca may have believed that their sacred actions of walking through these lines on that arid earth would help to bring back that sunrise that heralded the return of the rain.

#### **Suggested Reading:**

Aveni, *People and the Sky*.

#### **Questions to Consider:**

1. More than any other sacred landscape that we have considered, the Nazca Lines seem a miracle of simple technology creating gigantic works and effects. What might this say about Nazca culture in general?
2. Without the superhuman scale, do you find the Nazca art evocative of religious or spiritual concerns?

## **Lecture Twenty-Seven—Transcript**

### **Desert Lines at Nazca**

Welcome back. We turn now from the majestic stone monuments of Giza and Stonehenge, to another sacred landscape of a completely different kind, a set of extraordinary and enigmatic lines in a desert. We pass from people who have expended levels of skill and engineering and science on raising stone monuments that seem hard to grasp for folks who lived up to 5,000 years ago, to a people who used the simplest of technologies to create a landscape dedicated to sacred purposes, which in its way is still as impressive and certainly much larger than either Giza or the Salisbury Plain section dominated by Stonehenge. I'm referring to the famous Nazca Lines of the Peruvian coastal desert, a zone south of Lima, where rain may not fall for years, where the little rain that does come in comes in the form of humidity and clouds floating in, drifting eastward out of the Pacific. It's the mountains that back the coastal plain, falls there, occasionally in El Nino years in torrents, but often just enough to sustain agriculture and human communities in the river valleys that come down to the Pacific from those mountains that line the coast.

In between two of those river valleys is the pampa, the high, dry, area that is the desert zone where these Nazca Lines were first noted by outsiders in the 1930s, when pilots of small craft flying over that area of Peru looked down and saw drawings of enormous size, etched into the surface of this arid landscape. These are the Nazca Lines, world famous today. They were virtually unknown in the world except to the local people before the 1930s, and it's going to be our task to try to understand their religious purpose, how they were made, who made them, and what they symbolized to this lost civilization. Because if they look simple, they nonetheless are not, as we know now, the product of a simple people.

There is a ceremonial city of a type we're very familiar with by now in this course. Its name is Cahuachi, and it existed during the sort of high phase of the Nazca civilization. Nazca, by the way, you can spell either N-A-Z-C-A or N-A-S-C-A, so if you're researching it, please look it up under both spellings. This Nazca civilization rises in this zone of the Peruvian coast at about 100 B.C., and it endures until about 750 A.D. It's roughly contemporary with Teotihuacán up in Mexico. It had a big ceremonial center with 40 or so pyramids and temples in it. It's not a residential zone. This is not a city like

Cahokia or Teotihuacán. It is a place where people come seasonally and for special events. We'll be seeing a similar situation next time up in Chaco Canyon in New Mexico, with certain ceremonial centers visited by large numbers of people at certain times of the year for great festivals and religious ceremonies. That's what Cahuachi was; it was this ceremonial place.

There was a wall around it that initially gave people the impression that saw it from a distance that maybe it had been fortified. This wall was never more than about a foot and a half. So it's not a defensive wall; it's a religious wall. It's not keeping enemies out. It is defining a sacred space just like that example I keep returning to, our mound cluster at Chillicothe Ohio, where the Hopewellian cult worshippers set off their little mound city and their sacred long houses, their great dwellings where the ancestors were tended to and worshiped. They set it off with that little perimeter wall of earth, never intended to be a serious fortification. Cahuachi was therefore the center of a cult. The center of the communal life was in two river valleys on either side and then in between stretched the pampa, that high arid ground.

When, in the 1930s, those pilots saw these images, what were they looking at? First of all they were seeing lines, enormous lines in the desert. We now know that there are more than 1,000 miles worth of lines though each line is usually just a few miles or few kilometers in length. These lines were radiating out from sort of nodal points. There were also geometric shapes, especially triangles and trapezoid shapes. You take a rectangle and widen one end and you've got a trapezoid such as the kind you would have seen had you been flying over the Nazca desert in the 1930s and been taken by surprise to see this geometry out there in the middle of this seemingly uninhabited and uninhabitable desert. The lines and the geometric figures, for the majority of the Nazca Lines, and they are the dominant figure in the largest part of the pampa, but in the southern zone of the pampa are 30 figures that really caught the attention of those early pilots and have continued to attract the attention of scientists, historians of religion, anthropologists, and archaeologists to this day. They are the figures, the figures that represent birds for the most part with different species identifiable: hummingbirds, condors, perhaps cormorants, as well as a monkey, which must be a visitor from the far side of the Andes because there are no monkeys in that area of Peru with a great coiled prehensile tail, spiraled up over its back, as well as a human figure, a lizard, various other animal shapes, animal figures.

As I said about 30 of these, and they're all done in a very interesting way. They're outlined so that you can start at one point and walk all the way around the perimeter of the body and never retrace your steps. The tail of the monkey has made a double spiral so you can walk into the internal point of the spiral, turn around and walk back out on the other spiral line and complete your traversal of the monkey's outline and again never retrace your steps. Maybe the most remarkable of all of them is a giant spider with its eight legs spread out on the desert surface, its body very realistically depicted and those legs, again, done in double form so that there's one continuous line outlining those figures. This is what gives the Nazca Lines their very recognizable artistic and aesthetic profile, is that outlining technique.

How were they made? This was the first question about them, and I mentioned already compared to Stonehenge, compared to the pyramids at Giza, which are such marvels of engineering and compared to the other sacred landscapes we will be looking at Chaco Canyon, at Angkor in Cambodia, and at Easter Island, all of which involve raising monumental amounts of stone and creating enduring monuments, the Nazca Lines, there's something ephemeral about them. Certainly, they are the simplest technology ever applied to such stupendous results.

The pampa there has a very unusual surface. It's volcanic. The Andes themselves are part of the ring of fire that circles the Pacific Ocean filled with earthquake zones and volcanic regions, the Andes themselves being volcanic in many places. A nearby volcano had spread out over the surface of the land, a volcanic material that wherever it was exposed, fragmented into fist-sized chunks, very regular, and on the surface, the iron and manganese in that volcanic material oxidized to a dark brown color and got kind of a polish to it. If you lift one of those stones you will have exposed a pink patch, a whitish pink patch of underlying, subsoil, sand, bedrock that shows up, glaringly as soon as the dark material on top is removed. All you need to do to create a line, visible virtually from outer space is lift off the rocks in a straight line to a certain width and you've created, by that very simple process, the laying out of a line across the desert visible from the air, visible from space.

There is no special trick, therefore, to the straight lines that form those lines radiating from the nodal centers or the lines that outline the trapezoids and triangles and so on. It can be done with a piece of

cord and two stakes and a group of people willing to spend the day, crouched down and moving the fist-sized rocks from one place that they've decided to clear and make a line, off to the sides. These will be piled up sometimes in little berms or located in little cairns or piles of stone. The animal figures are more difficult, but clearly they too could be projected on to the landscape with cords. We find most of those images appearing on Nazca pottery. We also find lots of Nazca pottery broken, up and down the lengths of the lines as if they were places where people were having activities. We'll get into what those activities might be later.

This Nazca pottery's been very helpful because the lines themselves and the figures made of the lines can't be dated by normal archaeological means. We don't yet have a way of dating at what point that desert surface underneath was exposed to the sun and how long it's been exposed to the open air. What we rely on is chronological links, artistic links, between the images on the desert, those figures of the animals and birds and images on pottery, which match them. That is what allows us to link the desert images to this pottery of the Nazca culture, basically in the first three quarters of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium A.D.

The Nazca lifestyle, although much grander and more populous at the time that the lines were being built, has not changed significantly up to our time, as far as we can see, in terms of its subsistence base. How are these people living? They're farming, in a small way. Cotton is a major crop, which they dye with various natural dyes in order to create black and yellow and red and blue. They are also producing various tuber crops and field crops that sustain the people, a broad range of local domesticated plants. They rely, desperately, on these occasional rains and then on underground seeps that come down into their area from the mountain slopes. The waters that fall on the mountain in the form of rain, will pass down under the earth and make their way to the sea, in many cases, not as exposed rivers, but as underground streams. From earliest times, the agriculturalists in this zone seemed to have created canals and irrigation channels hidden from the eye that are bringing that life-giving water to their fields. This is a place desperate for water, despite the grandeur of their ceremonial center there at Cahuachi. This is a people on the edge, on the edge of what could be supported in a land that is so unreliable in terms of the amount of rain that it receives and the

amount of water that it can correspondingly offer to farmers. That's a basic element we need to keep in mind.

The Nazca Lines, as soon as they were discovered, became the target of interest worldwide. An interesting figure involved with them is a mathematician from Germany named Maria Reiche. She went just to see them and then spent 50 years as the sort of volunteer caretaker of the lines and their advocate, their voice to the world for them to be protected and studied. In spite of her efforts the Pan-American highway was laid out to run straight through the middle of the body of the lizard. Nonetheless she did bring world attention to it, and there are very touching pictures of her walking the lines of the different figures, of the straight lines, of the geometric shapes, sweeping them, keeping them clean. Trying to deter people from bringing jeeps out on to the desert and creating unintentional new lines by spinning around in the area of the Nazca Lines and leaving as their wheel tracks, newly exposed stretches of the underlying subsoil that really detract from the whole effect of a preserved prehistoric sacred landscape.

The Nazca were not among the literate or writing people of South America. We have to reconstruct what was going on there from the clues we get embedded in the lines themselves and by the idea of how these people had to relate to their environment and what would have been important to them in terms of a religion that would sustain them and their way of life. Early on, people thought of astronomical links. The zanier end of this took the form of picturing people from other star systems, celestial aliens coming down to earth, creating these lines as sort of landing lines and clues because this was going to be a giant landing field and leaving big images behind. I don't credit this, I'm sorry. Certainly, the simplicity of the technique, when you think about it, doesn't go along with the idea of space age technologies coming down from other galaxies.

The idea that people on earth were looking at the stars and trying to represent them in the desert, that did seem to have some validity. Maria Reiche was a champion of the idea that those birds and the spider and the lizard and the monkey, that these are the representations of constellations that you see up in the sky. Many people seem to have had the idea of making star pictures as they looked up at the heavens, linking stars in a way that we all used to do when we were in kindergarten with joining the numbered dots on a



page in our art books and creating a picture that was all suggestion, all just sort of implied by the position of dots. Different civilizations have seen different images. She thought that the Nazca looked up in the sky and saw a lizard, a monkey, a hummingbird, and so on. She may well be right. They are kind of clustered together.

As for the lines in the desert, people began to say, well they must point to certain important celestial events. In the 1960s, Gerald Hawkins had published his famous book *Stonehenge Decoded*. In this book he had decided that there were lots of astronomical sight lines implied in the stone circle at Stonehenge in the slots between the different sarsen stones and in various pointer stones, like the heel stone, laid out so if you stand in the middle of Stonehenge and look through that entrance, through which you came, you will look back to the heel stone and over it you will see the midsummer sunrise on the summer solstice morning. This idea that ancient people were astronomers, sky watchers, students of the stars, and that they incorporated this astronomical lore into their religious beliefs, into their religious monuments, this became very popular. Gerald Hawkins himself got hold of a map of the Nazca Desert, got hold of some information about the different lines. They had not been at that time adequately mapped. No comprehensive collections had ever been made of all of the designs and all of the figures on the desert. He took what he had, and he laid them out, and he did what he had done at Stonehenge: He ran it through a computer. What he did in that computer was put risings and settings of stars and constellations at various times in the year, where would you see them around the horizon? And his deduction was, I don't see consistent patterns here. I don't see certain points in the horizon that I know to be of astronomical significance favored by the lines. In other words, lots of lines converging on a certain point. It seemed to him, random. On the strength of his great reputation, many people began to dismiss the idea of an astronomical link between the heavenly bodies and what we see laid out there in that thousand mile's worth of lines on the Nazca Desert.

Hawkins has been criticized for not fully taking into account the fact that Nazca lies within the Tropics. I do think this is a fair criticism of that work, important though it was for debunking the idea that every single line was oriented to a specific star or celestial rising. One of the things he overlooked was the fact that within the tropics there are days when the sun stands directly overhead. It is at the zenith between the

Tropic of Capricorn and the Tropic of Cancer. There will always be at least one day in the year, maybe it's only a midsummer day, when the sun will be in the zenith, beyond those two lines, toward the poles. In the temperate zones, the sun is never directly overhead. Let's go back to Machu Picchu for a moment, standing there by *intihuatana* stone, the Hitching Post of the Sun, you remember sculpted out of a natural block. That upright post that's the central feature of that altar, that sun altar, on the day when at Machu Picchu, which is within the tropics, on the day when the sun is at the zenith, or the two days if its coming and going, there would be no shadow. There would be a miraculous moment where this thing which always cast a shadow on the rest of the days of the year suddenly was in pure sunlight, lit by sunshine all around. Hawkins, being an Englishman and living in Great Britain, where that never happens, the sun, if it is visible, is certainly never straight overhead, left that out. That's the kind of example, that, I hope someday will be brought back in and applied to the Peruvian desert there at Nazca; some of the very specific local elements of astronomy.

At any rate, I think the great advance was made by a visit from an American scholar named Anthony (Tony) Aveni of Colgate University in 1977. Aveni is a pioneer in the field of archaeoastronomy or cultural astronomy, as it's being called more and more to kind of take it away from just being about old things. Archaeoastronomy, cultural astronomy, is a field that seeks to take knowledge of the stars and the heavens and put it into its cultural context at different times in history, at different places around the world, trying to see how people would take astronomical knowledge and apply it to their own science, their navigation, their farming, their hunting, and a particular interest of Aveni, their religion. Tony Aveni had been there in Peru, and I should mention that there at Colgate University he is both an astronomer and an anthropologist/archaeologist. He unites in himself these two fields and has been an ideal person to lead the way into getting widespread public acceptance for the idea that the ancients knew an awful lot more about astronomy than the average person in the street in our modern mainstream culture does, and that it mattered to them. They took it seriously, and they believed that this lore was an essential part of knowledge about the world.

He had been, in 1977, doing some work at a place familiar to us now, Cuzco, that center of the Inca Empire, and he was studying something we've already talked about. You'll remember that when we spoke of Machu Picchu we talked about how the Incas laid out

sacred lines radiating from Cuzco across the landscape that had along them huacas, little places, nodal places of spiritual force, divine power, supernatural effect. Machu Picchu seems to have been one of those huacas on one of those lines. Aveni was studying these lines with a colleague, and they were interested in the practical purpose that the Incas put the divisions to. The lines were laid out, allegedly on sacred principals, but they created patterns of governing and administration and, above all, irrigation, water rights within the wedges of land that were formed by these radiating lines. That was what Aveni was particularly studying.

They had a few days left before they needed to be back in the United States after they finished in Cuzco, so they went to Nazca. Neither of them had ever seen the famous Nazca Lines. They experienced that. They were, of course, stunned by the grandeur of the conception, by the stark beauty of the landscape. But as they looked at the radiated lines—they had just come from Cuzco—they couldn't help thinking of those huacas, of the lines that radiate out from a center. When they went back and did a proper survey, because they couldn't leave this alone, it was so exciting what they had seen, they finally brought a large crew back. They did some of the first serious work on the ground of trying to map the lines, collect all the pottery shards, get dates for the different figures and so on. They found that those nodal centers from which the lines were radiating, tended to be, once you got on the ground, little spurs of hills, little headlands, that were the last little bit of elevated land coming down to the edge of the desert. When you climbed to the top of one of those you did, indeed, have sight lines to the horizon and the lines tended to radiate out from those.

They also found that the lines formed a network of continuous interlacing that spanned the pampa between the two populated and farmed river valleys, and that if you started one, you could make your way, in a devious sort of path along these sacred lines, if they are indeed sacred, from one valley to the other. They begin to get the sense of a system, of a desert being used, the dry land between the two populated areas, as a spiritual zone crossed by lines, having these lines radiating out from fixed important points in the same way that those sacred lines of the Inca had done, radiating up from Cuzco.

But what did it all mean? What's the point here? They also used a computer. They took the lines, a map of the desert with the lines, home with them. They whited out or erased anything that was not a

straight line going somewhere. The trapezoids, the triangles, the animal and bird figure, they were all whited out. What was left were these straight lines going to the horizon. What they found were there was a cluster, a cluster that pointed at the point on the horizon where the sun would come up at a certain time of the year, right around November 1. That's one of those times the sun is in the zenith if you are there at the Nazca Desert. That seemed an important point: There it is sunrise. But there's another clue here. Aveni looked at the calendar of the Nazca year in terms of farmers. Why would that date matter to a lot of farmers with their cotton and their vegetable crops, and he realized immediately why. November 1 is the beginning of the rainy season, to the extent that there is going to be a rainy season, it will begin then.

Here's people who have identified, with lines, a sunrise that will give them a fixed point in the rotation of the year, a day on which they can hope for the rain to begin, although in some years, it will fail them. This is something to be anxious about. This is something to be concerned about. If you're standing on some of those nodal points in those high places, the line going off to the horizon emphasizes the sunrise. This is a point I think we should consider here. You don't need to build a Stonehenge to make the kinds of astronomical observations of midsummer sunrise, midwinter sunset, that Gerald Hawkins was excited to point out or coded into the circle at Stonehenge. You could do that wooden posts or just rocks on the ground. If it's going to be part of your religion you, want to make it an impressive religious experience to see, to witness, some kind of a line, some kind of a gap between stones, some kind of a structure like that in Newgrange in Ireland, where a subterranean passageway in an artificially built mound lets a beam of light in at midwinter sunrise. These lines, then, have an aesthetic effect, but they are, many of them, aligned to that critical sunrise at which the year turns, turns from dry to wet, turns from death, if it were to continue dry, to life.

Aveni concluded there is an astronomical basis here, not truly astronomical in the sense of star related but solar that it's about the sun and it's movement at the time of the year that was most critical to these farmers. They had coded into these lines, lines that emphasized that point, that would line up to the moment when the sun seemed to be coming up. I'd like you to think back to our suns in the Natchez society, who seemed to bring up the sun every day by wailing, by crying to it. It's something like that. You are creating

signs on the earth. You are creating specialist people, who have now perished, who have helped bring up the sun and then bring on the rain without which these people cannot live.

Whether the animal figures, as Maria Reiche believed, were constellations is still open to question since we've lost the lore of these people, these Nazca people. We don't know what they might have believed. Aveni certainly seems to have created a very strong case for the idea that water magic and solar magic were put together to fuel the idea of lining the desert, lining the bare land between these two river valleys and their communities with special symbols of that resurrection of the new year coming with the rain, with the water, with that element that will sustain their crops.

Aveni was also interested in certain of those trapezoidal figures and triangular figures. He and other scientists working with his colleagues figured out that they seemed to be charting underground water sources passing through the desert. They are like a sacred, or at least symbolic, grid on top of the land to what lies beneath that can help give life to people.

Finally, we return to that point, which was pointed out by Maria Reiche and other visitors, that you can walk the lines, both the figures, you can completely go around them in the same way that you may see modern people at a religious site walking a labyrinth that's been laid out on the ground, such as the famous one in Chartres Cathedral, where the labyrinth itself was the emblem of the tortuous path that we go through life or people walking through the desert on the straight line perhaps toward that November sunrise that represented the beginning of the rainy season. To carry us into our world of ethnographic parallels and modern people, it's very striking that the modern Andean tribes close to the Nazca regions make walking tours, pilgrimages, sacred hikes, part of their religious experience. It may be, indeed, that at Nazca we see an art that was not really meant to be flown over, observed from the air, captured on a million photos snapped from an airplane, but truly an art that was meant to be experienced, an art in the desert meant to be walked through by people who must have believed that their sacred actions on that arid earth would help every year to bring back that sunrise that heralded the return of the rain.

## Lecture Twenty-Eight

### Skywatchers at Chaco Canyon

#### Scope:

When American archaeologists started to excavate the immense ruined Pueblo Bonito in Chaco Canyon, they focused on a remarkable prehistoric city that had endured for about four centuries (c. 750–1150 A.D.). The ceremonial nature of the site was revealed in the 37 circular kivas built into the pueblo, each with a central *sipapu* through which ancestral spirits emerged from the underworld. But Pueblo Bonito proved to be only 1 of 19 population centers that the vanished Anasazi built in Chaco Canyon. Radiating from these centers were straight roads or ceremonial pathways that formed a network covering hundreds of square miles. Researchers in the new field of archaeoastronomy have been able to demonstrate that many elements of Chacoan architecture and site planning were linked to celestial phenomena, such as the summer solstice marked by an elaborately contrived “sun dagger.” Anasazi ritual seems to have intensified with climate change and environmental deterioration.

#### Outline

- I. In about 700 or 750 A.D., the descendants of the Anasazi moved into Chaco Canyon in New Mexico and created a ceremonial center and landscape that we turn to in this lecture.
  - A. Chaco Canyon runs east to west and is surrounded by mesas.
  - B. Chacoans had a tradition of making pit houses, which gained new meaning through time.
    1. Pit houses became circular kivas, ceremonial rooms.
    2. They were either below ground level or submerged within large building complexes.
  - C. Chaco Canyon originally had great stands of timber, and Chacoans depended on big pine trees for their architecture.
    1. They were used as posts to hold up the kivas' roofs.
    2. Each new level of a ceremonial house was supported by wooden beams.
    3. The forests fell victim to the creation of these monumental buildings.

## II. The nine Great Houses emerged in about 1000–1150 A.D.

- A. They are towering structures of sandstone, comprising 100–800 rooms, containing storerooms, corridors, and kivas.
- B. Pueblo Bonito is the largest Great House.
  - 1. It is divided by a central wall, and on either side were great kivas.
  - 2. There are smaller kivas all around and hundreds of smaller storerooms.
- C. The first archaeologists assumed this was a city, but it lacked evidence of a large population; thus it must have been a ceremonial center.

## III. Let's try to reconstruct the religion that went on inside these monuments.

- A. In the storerooms were treasures: bones of scarlet macaws, copper bells, marine shells, and turquoise.
  - 1. This gave the initial impression of widespread trading networks, but they were traded up from Mexico.
  - 2. As part of a ritual system, they ended up as offerings or as ritual paraphernalia.
- B. The pottery found in the small kivas, which came from all over the ancestral Pueblo domain, suggests each clan had its own place of worship and ceremony within the larger site.
- C. Meetings took place first in the small kivas and ended in two large kivas, echoing the division into moieties—halves—of many Native American communities.
- D. The overall structure reminds us of an ancient Greek theater.
  - 1. The area where the kivas are is entirely or partially below ground.
  - 2. Rising ranks of storerooms frame the kiva and created a ritual space for display to the assembled groups.
  - 3. It is a perfect setting acoustically, in terms of site lines, and in overall impressiveness.
- E. We have very little elaborate art from Chaco, but life and ceremony were complex, colorful, and intricate.
- F. Pottery was very important since it played a central role in the ceremonies and communal feasts.

## IV. Let's go down into a kiva.

- A. People are seated to watch what was happening in the middle of the big circular space, and the gigantic wooden posts rise in the very center.
- B. In the hole in the ground is the central place of Chacoan religious belief.
  - 1. That hole is a *sipapu*, through which the ancestors emerged from the dark underworld, led by a locust playing a pipe.
  - 2. They came from the third world into the light of the fourth world.
  - 3. This belief ties into a cyclical view of human history and a cavelike underworld.
- C. The moment when the ancestors, called katchinas, emerged from the *sipapu* was reenacted.
- D. This is not a religion with a great cult of gods.
  - 1. Instead, katchinas emerge from their *sipapu* to join the living in ceremonies and rituals where the katchinas receive gifts and offerings.
  - 2. When they go back down, they act as intermediaries with the gods on behalf of the living.
- V. The nine Great Houses of Chaco Canyon are set within a sacred landscape.
  - A. In the 1970s, pilots saw roads, straight ceremonial ways, which linked the Great Houses to each other and to outliers.
  - B. These spirit roads create the sacred landscape of these Chacoans.
    - 1. They tend to be places where the landscape was simply smoothed.
    - 2. Sometimes they are narrow, but at other times they split into four branches.
    - 3. The tradition that the ancestors migrated through the land and divided into four groups is one of the things that have helped identify these as spirit paths.
  - C. Where paths met canyon walls or mesas, the builders made ramps or rock-cut steps.

- D. This was a religion where movement through the landscape is itself a religious act.
  - 1. Among modern Pueblo people, foot races between representatives of clan and community are very popular.
  - 2. These roads may have also served as ceremonial racetracks.
- E. If we imagine Chaco as it was 1,000 years ago, we can see it brimming with life.
  - 1. There was action in those central Great Houses with their kivas.
  - 2. Additionally, there were people on these ceremonial ways, racing, walking, and praying.
  - 3. Above all, the people honored their ancestors in a landscape that their ancestors themselves were the first to mark.

### Suggested Reading:

Plog, *Ancient Peoples of the American Southwest*.

### Questions to Consider:

- 1. In what ways does the reconstructed religion of Chaco Canyon resemble the religions of Mesoamerica at Teotihuacan and Mayan sites?
- 2. How might environment and climate help shape religious beliefs?

## Lecture Twenty-Eight—Transcript

### Skywatchers at Chaco Canyon

Welcome back. In about the year 700 or 750 of our era, just at the time that the great Nazca civilization that created those lines in the desert was dwindling away and losing the ceremonial centers and the grandeur that had sustained it during what must have been the times of good rain, there was a movement of people into a canyon in New Mexico, a canyon called Chaco Canyon. It's along the Chaco River and in the San Juan basin, up there in the northwest corner of New Mexico, near what we call the Four Corners, where four states come together in a cross, if you look at the modern map. Starting with Colorado, up in the northeast quadrant, Colorado, then down to New Mexico, over west to Arizona, and finally up to Utah. The Four Corners region was the home of a people that have been called the Anasazi or the ancient or ancestral Pueblo peoples and the Chaco Valley people, who are our subject today in this lecture. They come from that larger group. They, in fact, seem to have created in that valley a ceremonial center that people from long distances away would regard as the sort of hearth, the central place, of their religious practices. It's to this sacred center, and this sacred landscape of Chaco Canyon that we are turning in this lecture.

Chaco Canyon is an east-west running canyon surrounded by mesas, those tall flat-topped arid elevations and with steep sides coming down to the valley and a little bit like the situation we saw at Nazca, when there has been rain and the rain is coming down the slopes of the mesas, there's a lot of fertility. There's a lot of opportunity for crops and so on in the valley floor along the Chaco River. The ancestral peoples there were practicing irrigation on a large scale in order to channel that water, lead it to their fields and irrigate their crops of corn, beans, and squash. Those people had brought, out of the ancestral past, a tradition of a pit house. If you approached the community sometime before the great ceremonial houses grew up in Chaco Canyon, you would have seen a rectangular house up above the ground level, and then a couple of holes in the ground. One of those holes led down to the pit house itself, which had a wood roof supported by big posts, and a little ceremonial hole called a *sipapu* (that we're going to talk about in a little bit), a fire pit directly under the entrance hole, so that unwanted folks, if they tried to jump in, are going to land in the fire, and then a vent which creates another hole at ground level.

Our name for this, “kiva,” comes from the modern Hopi language. They are descendents of these ancestral Pueblo peoples. In Hopi, “kiva” means ceremonial room. What started out as an ordinary below-ground dwelling, as far as we can see, gained a new meaning through time. This is going to be the most impressive feature of Chaco Canyon and its ceremonial centers, are great circular kivas. All are entirely below ground level or submerged within large building complexes that mimic the shape of those ancestral pit houses.

In Chaco Canyon, originally, there were great stands of timber. We know this because the monumental buildings that were created in Chaco Canyon by these ancestral Pueblo peoples, the Chacoans as we’re going to call them, they depended upon big trees. Big pine trees, some of them of immense size. The blue stones being moved from Wales to Stonehenge, that was big, but moving some of these trees which could also weigh tons to bring the logs all the way to Chaco, that was a huge task also. They played a very important role in the architecture because although the shells of these now above-ground ceremonial Great Houses are made of the local sandstone, laid in a dry stone technique, the central post to hold up the immense roofs of the kivas, those were tree trunks set on stones in a pit so they wouldn’t subside into the earth. And radiating out from them were timber roofs and then in the different stories and different levels of the great ceremonial houses, each new level was supported by wooden beams that spanned the distance between the walls. Sockets were left in the stone walling, so that these roof beams could be anchored. And then more wood was laid on top to create the upper levels. So wood being burned as fuel, wood being poured into these buildings, the forest as you can imagine is taking a beating.

When people arrived, way back there around 700, there were forests in what is today a desert, although there was a great deal of aridity around on the uplands and those forests did fall victim to the creation of these monumental buildings in Chaco Canyon. There were nine Great Houses. Lying back behind them, remember, is an ancestral tradition of farming the valley and living in it in a normal Pueblo way. Pueblo, by the way, is Spanish word applied to these peoples, not the Chacoans specifically—they were gone by the time the Spanish came—but to their descendants such as the Hopi, who had a tradition of living in these tightly packed villages with adobe or stone houses. The Spanish called each one a pueblo (that just means

village), and it comes from the old Latin word *populus*, meaning a people. Pueblo peoples is a little bit redundant in terms of the actual linguistic etymology. At any rate, that’s all we mean. These Pueblo peoples are folks who’ve settled down. They are sedentary. They’ve created a community, tightly packed. They lived together in an interwoven clan system. They farm, sort of communally owned fields and they support themselves through an intensive agricultural regime, mainly in the hands of women. The men go out and hunt some, but with the disappearance of the forest less and less game, and certainly, less big game is routinely available.

These also, like our Nazca, are soon living on the edge. They are a people in an area where there’s an ecological balance that is threatening to slip the wrong way into draught and aridity and an unsustainable environment for human beings and human agriculture. The nine Great Houses emerge in Chaco Canyon, fairly far on in its history of habitation, several centuries after the first people move in, the Great Houses are built in a great surge of building running from about 1000 to about 1150. We’re roughly contemporary with our old friends the Cahokians here in Chaco who are building their great mounds and their ceremonial city up there on the Mississippi River at the same time that Chacoans are creating their ceremonial centers along the Chaco River. The big difference is that Chaco becomes a place that is not urbanized, that is not filled up with streets and plazas and a permanent community. Small groups certainly did continue to live there throughout the year, but they can’t explain the gigantic scale of these nine Great Houses.

Let’s look at those houses now. They are towering structures of stone, sandstone. They have varying numbers of rooms. Wiji, the remotest eastern-most of the Great Houses, [has] only about 100 rooms. When you get to the center of the cluster with places like Pueblo Bonito and Chetro Ketl, you’re up in the 500, 600, even 700, 800 rooms in each of these Great Houses. They are built as blocks where we have storerooms, corridors, ritual rooms like kivas, all together, all packed together in one great structure. If you look at the plan of Pueblo Bonito you can see that the kivas, those circular rooms, really dominate.

Pueblo Bonito, it’s the largest, let’s look at it. It’s divided down the middle of its half-moon shape by a central wall. On either side of that wall were great kivas, one on each side. A pair of huge kivas,

huge circular kivas, leaving that original pit house way back in the remote foreworld of this Chacoan people. Then smaller kivas all around, and then literally hundreds of smaller storerooms. When the first archaeologist came to Chaco Canyon in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, they assumed this was a city, that it had been a huge population living there. It was only gradually through the years as they kept working that their failure to turn up the extensive cemeteries, the vast dumps or rubbish pits or as we call them, middens. Middens are the trash heaps that come out of kitchens and ordinary daily activities at a site, they weren't present in very great numbers. There weren't enough rooms with big cooking fires. They should have been all over the place. Finally the places where the women of the Chacoan tribes would have ground the corn, those stone bins, where they would have knelt all day—well for hours each day at any rate—rolling the pestles back and forth across the dried corn to create the cornmeal for their families. Where were they? We know that this was a daily activity for all Chacoan and Pueblo women. When their bones are found they are often horribly distorted from arthritis and from the daily crouching for hours doing the arduous work of rolling the stones back and forth across the corn.

We were lacking, at Chaco, the evidence for the large population living ordinary daily lives that the vast size of the buildings would seem to require. What's the conclusion? The conclusion is we're looking here at another one of our ceremonial centers, a place like Cahuachi was for the Nazca. A place like those megalithic monuments were for the seasonally nomadic tribes of Atlantic Europe, a place like Mound City in Chillicothe. This is another one of those places devoted to religion. What we're going to try to do now is reconstruct the religion that went on inside these spectacular monuments which were already abandoned by the time the first Europeans came into the area and yet had striking parallels to what could be seen in the existing Pueblos of tribes like the Hopi.

First of all, let's talk about what the archaeologists did find. Let's start with the storerooms. In those storerooms were treasures. There were the bones of scarlet macaws from Mexico. There were copper bells from Mexico. There were marine shells like conch shells from either the Pacific Coast or the Gulf of Mexico. These are far, far away. There was turquoise in large quantities from mines (this has been determined through the analysis of the stone) mines near Santa Fe in New Mexico also but a long way from Chaco. This gave the

initial impression of widespread trading networks, that this was again an urban hub of an intensive economic system that drew in foreign trade goods. We don't think that's true any more. They were traded up from the forests of Mexico, the coasts of Mexico, into this interior place as part of a ritual system ending up as offerings or as ritual paraphernalia in the storerooms.

Then we got the little kivas. Those smaller, circular areas. We're still kind of focusing on Pueblo Bonito here. Those small kivas would suggest that each clan had its own place of worship and ceremony within the larger site. We figure many clans and communities are coming together here because of another class of archaeological artifact, the pottery. There's pottery from all over the ancestral Pueblo domain, which covers thousands of square miles in the Four Corners region. Many different communities are represented by pots that were left at Chaco, maybe brought full or maybe just brought to be used in the ceremonies of the clan. The multiplicity of the kivas, which has seemed so puzzling to people who think, well you would never have that many churches all in one place or that many mosques or that many places of a normal religion, they can't be religious. I feel they must be religious, and they are showing us that many different groups each need their own small place of gathering for their ceremonies. We'll be talking about what those ceremonies consisted of in a moment.

Think back to what I said about the big half-moon shape of Pueblo Bonito, beautiful pueblo, the largest of the Chaco Canyon nine Great Houses. It's the sort of straight edge of its half moon, faces down toward the river. Its curved back is toward the wall of the mesa that rises dramatically behind it. Like all the other Great Houses, it is on the north side of the Chaco River with the mesa, north mesa behind. Those rooms, those storerooms, and then those kivas scattered around, they are packed in, in such a way that they frame two big central kivas, large enough, I think, to hold probably everybody who was in the smaller ones during the preliminary ceremonies of this great gathering time when you come to Chaco with your pottery and your treasures and offerings and so on. You come together, you meet first in your small kivas, each devoted to a certain clan or group, and then finally getting together in these two large ones.

This division into two is found among many Native American tribes and communities. The idea that there were moieties, [that is] halves

of a community, and that the halves settled in different parts of the town or the village. They compete in certain ways; they collaborate in certain ways. There a set of clans in one; a set of clans in the other. There may be rules about always taking a spouse from the other side, from one of the other moieties. The division into the two, which sort of echoes some of those ideas about the original humans being hero twins, a duality in creation at its very beginning seems to be reflected in the two big kivas within Pueblo Bonito. We've got divisions of clans, I'm hypothesizing here, large ceremonies happening within the big kivas.

If we step back and look at the overall structure, let's go to the other side of the Chaco River and look back at Pueblo Bonito, what we see is something that reminds us of an ancient Greek theater. One of those outdoor theaters built in to the side of a hill where there will be a curving mass of seats focused on a central playing area. The area where the kivas are is down on that low area, entirely or partially below ground. The rising ranks of the storerooms, hundreds of them, are coming up behind and framing that so we've created something we've talked about before, a ritual space for display, for stage shows, for theatricals, for special orations to the assembled groups. We know that in some ancient southwest tribes elders would stand in central places and address people about how they should behave, what they should believe, what should be important to them as people of the community. This would be a perfect setting for that acoustically, as well as in terms of site lines and just overall impressiveness to lend dignity to the figures standing down there in that central space with a sort of theatricality of the audience arrayed around them to watch and to hear.

We get into the issue of what might have been the spectacles that they were seeing. What would have been shown? What would have been displayed in this place? We'll talk about that, and then we're going to go down into the kivas and talk about the mythology that probably lies behind all this. We have very little elaborate art from Chaco. The nine Great Houses there and the landscape around them, the sacred landscape that we're going to be talking about in the very last part of our lecture today, they are bare. They are stark. They are monumental. They have some of the same effect of Stonehenge because of the simplicity. We know that the life and the ceremonies in those Great Houses was anything but simple. It was complex. It was colorful. It was intricate.

We get an impression of that from the archaeological remains, I've already talked about some of those. We get a vivid, almost snapshot of it, from a somewhat later Pueblo site, a place called Pottery Mound where the beautiful painted murals that were inside the kivas, the ceremonial halls and rooms, were preserved. There are fantastic images of worshipers at these ceremonies, these Pueblo ceremonies, and they show us what we're missing, in terms of putting the whole ensemble of artifacts together into a spectacular vision of the spirit world, of ancestors, of a different way of seeing the landscape, something riveting, something exciting, something worth putting in paint on a wall. One of these images from Pottery Mound, shows us for instance, a great bowl with the typical Pueblo designs, the geometric designs in the colors, those earth colors, the creamy white, the red, the black, the yellow, the bowl balanced on the head of a standing figure who is confronting us with hands held to either side in a pose that harks all the way back to those early figures flanked by beasts in the Old World and being mistress or master of beasts and animals, like the Mother Goddess on her leopard flanked throne there at Catalhöyük.

Here the beast in either hand of the central figure are the macaws from Mexico, those scarlet birds, showing us that it wasn't just the bones and the feathers that came up but the live birds themselves brought all the way up in cages from the forests of Mexico. They are being held out on either hand, and then the figure itself is fantastically arrayed in clothing that has been woven in many patterns, a big sash around the middle, and then a mask or I think possibly face paint. Again, in some of these the image is that perhaps of a puma, of a cat, some of them it's just geometric lines in various colors and patterns. In any case the effect is to eliminate the personal identity of whoever is behind that mask or within that paint and replace a spirit identity, a sacred identity, symbolized by the new face, by the sacred emblems, those red birds being held out in either hand, and by the elaborate ceremonial clothing. As soon as we begin to imagine this figure with its tassels and its bright clothing, dancing, marching, moving through the landscape or emerging from the gloom of kiva, we can get a sense of the power, the dramatic power that must have vibrated from these rituals at Pueblo Bonito and the other Great Houses of Chaco Canyon.

One thing about that pottery, this is a people for whom pottery was very important. We've talked about some others, the Athenians in



Greece with their pottery vessels, our Moche people who were responsible for the great tombs of folks like the Lords of Sipán, all of these made pottery a high art. None more than our Pueblo people. The pottery plays a central role in the ceremonies, certainly in terms of offerings, certainly in terms of sharing of communal feasts. Perhaps with the idea of sharing feasts with ancestors because the kivas are a place where ancestors and the living mingle on sacred ground.

Let's go down now into one of the kivas. We have arrived in a big circular space. It's filled with people. There are benches around the wall. People are probably seated on those benches to watch a show in the middle. In the very center rises gigantic wooden posts rising up out of the ground to support the roof. Light coming in dimly through a central hole and maybe from a ventilated shaft, and in the center a fire and off center a hole in the ground, that hole in the ground is the central place of Chacoan religious belief and of the belief of all of the Pueblo peoples. That hole is called a *sipapu* and it is the image of the hole through which the ancestors emerged out of their dark underworld into the light of day in our world, led by a mythical figure, a locust playing a pipe or flute. That little divine figure leading up the folks who will become the ancestors of the Pueblo people. They are coming from the darkness of what was called the third world into the light of the fourth world, and that was the world in which the people who built the Great Houses at Chaco lived, the fourth world. If you're feeling a tie here to some of the cycles that we talked about that were calculated by those star watchers and astronomers at Palenque among the Maya and also Teotihuacan, which is not that far to the south of Chaco Canyon and the Rio Grande River and the general area of the Pueblo peoples, which went under at about the same time that Chaco starts to rise. You're right, the idea of the cycles of human history, the idea of the cave like underworld from which the ancestors emerge into the light. You may remember this even from the Inca with their tradition of Manco Capac that first Inca around 1200 leading the people out of a cave with three entrances. All of this, I think, tied into the intensity of religious belief that hovered around that little hole leading down into the ground.

Because although it was in that world view, the Puebloan world view, a historical event, the moment when the ancestors emerged up out of the *sipapu* led by locusts, it was repeated in the same way that in the Christian religion the breaking of bread and the sharing of the wine at that supper before the crucifixion is repeated in communions

again and again at masses all over the world. That original emergence from the *sipapu* was repeated as the ancestral spirits, having lived on this earth in the sunlight and then descended through the *sipapu* after death, they come back up. Every kiva has an image of that one eternal original *sipapu* wherever in mythical or real geography it may lie. Each kiva has one, and that symbolizes the return spot of the ancestors to earth. They do not come now garbed as they were in life. They come garbed in fantastic clothing, fantastic headdresses, masks, body paint, feathers, fringes, geometric decorations and paint, and they are called katchinas now.

In order to help children, who are always brought into these ceremonies so they can learn the ceremonial rituals and the beliefs that are behind them, the children are instructed in the identities of the katchinas through dolls, through little images of the various ancestors so that these can be pointed out. When in the gloom of those kiva ceremonies or up top on what I've hypothesized as sort of a playing area in the middle of the Pueblo Bonito Great House complex or out of doors in some sacred part of the valley. When men emerge, from hiding or from the shadows wearing the appropriate clothing and ceremonial garb of one of those katchinas, everybody in the clan knows who they are. Everyone in the community can recognize that person, and it's important they do because the katchinas are the bringers of gifts.

This is not a religion, as far as we can tell, with a great cult of gods. There aren't temples and altars within the complex at Chaco Canyon. There are instead places where these ancestral spirits, the katchinas, can emerge from their *sipapu* join the living in ceremonies, in rituals where the katchinas receive gifts and offerings to show how much they are loved and respected and remembered and counted upon by their descendants. They return back down through the *sipapu*, and it is then that they act as intermediaries, a role we have seen so many times in so many places for the ancestor spirits, intermediaries with the gods on behalf of the people they've left behind.

The nine Great Houses of Chaco Canyon are set, as I said, within a sacred landscape. That wasn't realized clearly until the 1970s when something happened at Chaco that we've already seen happen down with the Nazca. Pilots began to fly over the valley and the surrounding mesas, an arid part of the Four Corners region, and they saw what had never been seen on the ground, roads. When they were looked at down

on the ground, it was realized these aren't really practical highways. These are dead straight ceremonial ways that link the Great Houses, or link the Great Houses to outliers beyond the valley itself or link many communities together along, for example, one great north-south road, that ran for several hundred miles through the heart of the Puebloan lands with several communities dotted along it. Chaco Canyon is right on that great road.

Let me describe these roads for a minute, these spirit roads, which create the sacred landscape of these Chacoans and of the larger group of Puebloan peoples. They tend to be places where the landscape was simply smoothed. Sometimes they're very narrow as if just one person would pass along them. At other times they split into four branches and run along as if we came from the end of two-lane blacktop and suddenly it were a divided highway, imagine divided into four with median strips. That will go along for awhile. Where did that come from? There was a tradition, still recorded among the Hopi and the descendants of our Chacoans that at times as they came out of the ground, as the ancestors were migrating through the land they divided into four groups and went along in parallel. That's one of the things that's helped identify these as spirit paths. We see a landscape traversed by these where they met canyon walls or mesas. They would build big ramps so the road could continue to go straight up, even if there was an easy way by natural means that didn't involve the straight line, sometimes even rock cut steps were created so that the straight line could be traversed.

What went along these lines? I think we are back to the same idea that we just encountered with the Nazca. A religion where movement, movement through the landscape in the sort of sense of a pilgrimage is itself a religious act, is itself putting you in tune with the earth and the spirits under the earth. We can note that among modern Pueblo people, races between representatives of clan and community are very popular, foot races, and I think these may have also served as ceremonial racetracks (remember, please, our *Cursus*, our racetrack there near Stonehenge), that the landscape may have been enlivened by these competitions which carry us back to that whole world of sacred contests and struggles and ball games and bull dances and so on.

If we look at Chaco Canyon today, except for the touristic elements, it is a dry deserted place; but if we imagine it as it was, 1,000 years

ago, we can see it brimming with life at the times in the year when the great gatherings of the clans in the Pueblo communities met their and brimming with action as from those central Great Houses with their kivas, people spread out across the landscape on these ceremonial ways and roads, racing, walking, praying, and above all honoring the ancestors in a landscape that the ancestors themselves were the first to mark.

## Lecture Twenty-Nine

### Mountain of the Gods at Angkor

#### Scope:

Angkor Wat, the largest religious building in the world, was the funerary temple of the early 12<sup>th</sup>-century Khmer emperor Suryavarman II but was also a model of the Hindu cosmos. Just as pharaohs represented gods of the Egyptian pantheon, so Khmer rulers identified themselves with the creator god Shiva and established a phallic cult in his honor. Khmer temples imitated the towering form of Mount Meru in the center of the cosmos. Angkor Wat covered a full square mile in five nested rectangular enclosures. Its builder broke with tradition and dedicated it to the god Vishnu. Pilgrims traversed a processional way that was decorated with scenes from Hindu mythology and towers shaped like lotus buds. Angkor Wat also served as an observatory for celestial events such as solstices. Within a century, the Hinduism enshrined at Angkor Wat was supplanted by the Buddhist faith. Later abandoned to the forest, the temple began to yield its secrets to archaeologists only in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

#### Outline

- I. In this lecture, our site is in Angkor, Cambodia.
  - A. In 802 A.D., a Khmer prince named Jaya proclaimed the independence of his people and his territory from Java.
    1. Jaya had a vision of the Hindu creator god, Shiva.
    2. Shiva gave the prince a stone called the lingam as a testament to the future.
  - B. The Khmer empire lasted from 802 until 1431 A.D.
  - C. Jaya took the name Jayavarman, meaning Jaya the Shield.
  - D. Jayavarman started the Khmer on their road to glory.
    1. The various successive kings of the Khmer each created a temple that would reestablish the covenant with Shiva.
    2. The temple would hold the lingam in which resided the potency of the king himself.
- E. Angkor became a vast landscape, and in the midst of the urban complex are mountainlike temples.
  1. The earliest were simple temples on platforms, but they got more elaborate as time went on.
  2. They were dedicated both to Shiva and to their ancestors.
- II. From about 1100 to 1113 A.D., Suryavarman II instigated a religious revolution; he built Angkor Wat between 1113 and 1150.
  - A. Suryavarman came to the throne by fighting a civil war.
  - B. He chose to emblemize the Hindu god Vishnu instead of Shiva.
  - C. He created a new temple to serve three functions.
    1. It would be sacred to Vishnu and his worship.
    2. It would hold the lingam.
    3. It would be his own mausoleum.
  - D. At some point the Khmer monarchs began to call themselves god-kings, *devaraja*.
    1. As god-king, Suryavarman built a temple decorated with art that showed battles recounted in the Hindu epics.
    2. The battle scene is religious but also reminds everyone of his own career as a great conquering hero.
  - E. Architects were ordered to lay out a temple that borrowed ideas and forms from earlier Khmer temples to Shiva but raised them all to a level never before imagined.
    1. A great precinct was laid out in Angkor and walled off.
    2. Within the wall was a moat surrounding a central shrine.
    3. An additional wall was arranged around the island, with four gate pavilions that each mimicked the shape of the towering temple in the center.
  - F. We enter into that stage-managed world.
    1. The impressive sandstone gatehouse has towers with parapets and lotus bud-like tops.
    2. Once past that gatehouse, we arrive at the base of an artificial mountain that consisted of three terraces.
    3. From the third terrace sprang a quincunx pattern of towers.

- G. The kings of the Khmer loved pageantry.
1. One writing describes the king coming into the city preceded by the army, dancers, concubines, and all of the ministers and princes.
  2. The king himself entered standing on an elephant, covered in gold, and holding a great sword in his hand.
  3. In Angkor Wat, similar dramas were acted out and excitement was generated, but this would be in the cause of the religious fervor.

### III. Some of the symbolism of Angkor is laid out in its artwork.

- A. On its stone walls is the record of the religious ideas behind the Hindu faith.
- B. The most important panel is one that shows a creation scene from the *Mahabharata*, called "the churning of the milky ocean," in which Vishnu helps save the world.
- C. Vishnu is recognizable by his four arms holding four symbols: a lotus, a discus, a conch shell, and a ceremonial mace.
- D. Vishnu is a great warrior, diplomat, and trickster, which are all things that a king needs to be, which is why he was a model for Suryavarman.
- E. Angkor Wat itself is an image of the dwelling of the gods, Mount Meru, the five-peaked mountain where the axis of the world passed.
1. The axis is represented by the straight lines and the causeways that divided the rectangle of holy ground.
  2. The five peaks were the five towers.
  3. The Sea of Milk is our moat.
  4. Overall, it mirrors a mythological cosmos brought to earth in the service of the worship of Vishnu and this king.

### IV. For his mortuary monument, Suryavarman changed the normal temple scheme.

- A. All previous temples at Angkor had faced east, but his faces the west.
1. The west is where the souls of the dead go in primeval Khmer mythology.
  2. The panels at Angkor Wat are meant to be read in the opposite of the usual direction.

- B. Through all these things, Suryavarman II thought he had achieved immortality.

1. He was convinced that this sacred precinct would continue to be a place of worship for all time
2. However, his temple was ultimately taken over for the Buddhist faith.
3. Suryavarman did achieve immortality, but it was not the immortality that he dreamed of.

### Suggested Reading:

Jacques, *Angkor*.

### Questions to Consider:

1. Why might Suryavarman II have switched his religious allegiance from the Hindu god Shiva (revered by his predecessors) to Vishnu?
2. At Angkor Wat we see Hinduism supplanted by Buddhism. What other sacred structures have been adapted to the needs of successive religions?

## Lecture Twenty-Nine—Transcript

### Mountain of the Gods at Angkor

Welcome back. We have visited deserts for our three of our four sacred landscapes so far, the Egyptian Desert at Giza, Chaco Canyon, and the Nazca Desert of Peru. We have been out on the bare expanses of Salisbury Plain with Stonehenge. It seems only right to have a complete change of venue to move around to the other side of the world from those places to Southeast Asia and the nation of Cambodia and the dense jungles along the Mekong River and its tributaries to the site of the largest preindustrial city ever built on this earth, a city called Angkor. The name simply means the city in the language that was spoken in Southeast Asia back from a 1,000 to 1,500 years ago, a language that was derived as was the local Hindu religion from India. It was there in that zone, that we call Cambodia today, in 802, a young man named Jaya, proclaimed the independence of his people and his territory from Java, the island which had been ruling over them for so long. He said that he and his people, the Khmer people were now independent and rulers of a great kingdom of their own. Jaya claimed to have had a vision and if you are reminded by this vision of the young Prince Tutmosis, who is going to become Pharaoh Tutmosis III, sleeping beneath the shadow of the Sphinx and dreaming of Horus, and of the horizon speaking to him. Or if you are reminded of our Inca ruler Pachacuti, seeing the great sun Inti in a dream who promised him dominion if he would follow the way of Inti and worship the sun. You are right because this young conquering king had just that kind of dream.

He saw a great deity from the Hindu religion, the great creator god, Shiva. In this dream, Shiva held out a stone to this young man. It was the stone called the linga or lingam; it is a phallic stone emblemizing creative force, energy, dynamism, and fertility. He gave it to the young prince as a testament to the future that lay ahead of this young man and the kingdom that he would create and of an embodiment of the great potency both military and royal and personal sexual potency that was now being endowed on this young ruler. This was the founding dream of the Khmer empire which lasted from 802 until 1431. It had a long span of more than six centuries in which it was the dominant political force in Southeast Asia, dealing on terms almost of equality with the Chinese emperors in the lands to the north, and with the great monarchs of the island like Java down to the south. He took, this

young man, after that dream, the name Jayavarman. He said that Shiva had given it to him and that “varman” suffix which was used by all of his successors in their names. It means “shield,” “protectors.” We should be thinking of yet another of our monarchs here, our ritual kings, at Palenque in Maya country, where we encountered that King Pacal, whose name meant shield.

Jayavarman, in the terms of his dynastic background, is Jayavarman II. There had been an earlier one during the years in which the Khmer realm had been a little petty chiefdom or kingdom. Jayavarman started the Khmer off on their road to glory. It was an extraordinary journey for them, a journey of conquest, diplomacy, the acquisition of tremendous riches, certainly the fertility of the stone was demonstrated again and again, as their population exploded and they ultimately settled down north of a big lake called Tonlé Sap. They created, as I said at the beginning, the biggest city the world had ever seen up until the industrial era began, a city called Angkor that was as big as Los Angeles and had about a million inhabitants. It was about the same size as Rome in terms of population but far larger in terms of its spread through that rich lush forest land, north of that lake. As the rivers and streams were brought to the city and diverted into great lakes and reservoirs, the city grew and grew. The various successive kings of the Khmer, each created in the city, a temple, a temple that would reestablish the covenant with Shiva because the temple would hold lingam, that sacred phallic stone, in which resided a lot of the potency of the king himself. To think of other parallels with Egypt, the sexual side of Egyptian pharaohs has often been commented upon. It is part of the Egyptian art, part of the Egyptian tradition that the pharaoh is a great father of the kingdom in very specific physical ways. That potency was celebrated in these Hindu temples to the god Shiva that were built by each Khmer king at Angkor.

Angkor became, as the centuries rolled on, a vast landscape reaching farther than the eye could see, the archaeological park of modern times in Cambodia which attempts to delineate Angkor. It covers 125 square miles, and it does not contain it all. Rising from a sea of houses that were built out of wood and other perishable materials, the houses where ordinary people lived, and indeed the king's own palace would have been built of wood because it was explicitly believed that only the gods deserved stone. Here was a great city of timber and roofing of bamboo and thatch and tile, but sprouting from

the midst of this urban complex, the like of which we had not encountered before, are these mountain-like temples.

They start with a simple temple on a platform to raise it up a little bit above the plain, but they get more and more elaborate as time goes on. It is just one of these temples, although the entire city is itself a sacred landscape, dedicated by the temples, both to Shiva and by the ancestral pre-Indic worship of the local people to the ancestors again, the old cult of the Khmer before the Hindu traditions took hold was an ancestor worship. All of that is still there but when we get to the 1100s and to the year 1113, a new prince comes to the throne who creates a revolution in local religion and, in the course of staging that revolution, builds the grandest temple of all, the temple known as Angkor Wat or Angkor Wat, that W-A-T meaning simply temple or monastery temple. It is actually a Buddhist term from a later period applied to this amazing structure. Within the largest pre-industrial city, we now have the world's largest temple. And that is the landscape we are going to talk about, that one temple surrounded by this vast urban complex, the temple of Angkor Wat, built by Suryavarman II between 1113 and 1150 A.D., something he worked on throughout his reign.

Shiva, the ancient creator god had been the patron god of Khmer kings. Suryavarman, who had come to the throne obliquely. He had not been the obvious heir to the throne. He had had to fight a civil war in order to gain it and at the climax of the last battle, he was said to have leapt from his own war elephant on to the elephant of the rival prince and killed the other claimant to the throne with his own hand. He was truly a mighty warrior. He felt, I believe, like a self-made man, and he carried out some of the ideas that we see in Napoleon's coronation, for instance, where the pope was summoned up from Rome to crown Napoleon and restore Catholicism to a realm, the nation of France, that had rejected it. Suryavarman, I think, feels a bit of Napoleon complex, wants to renew things, change things, put his own stamp on the religion of his people and of this realm. He chooses a new god. Not Shiva, but Vishnu from that pantheon of Hindu gods. Vishnu will be his god; he will emblemize on earth. He will embody on earth Vishnu, as all of his predecessor have embodied Shiva. He still probably kept the lingam, but he wants to create a new temple; the biggest, the grandest of them all. It will serve three functions. It will be a temple that is sacred to Vishnu and his worship. It will probably be still the place in which the

lingam, that sacred stone that symbolizes the potency of the monarchy, is kept. Third, it is going to be the mausoleum of Suryavarman himself. He will be buried there. He is preparing a tomb in the same way that Khufu, way over in Egypt all those millennia earlier, had been preparing all through his reign the great pyramid to be his mausoleum, his burying place, where he could become a god and dominate the landscape for all time to come.

Suryavarman was fired by the same kind of religious zeal as all those others we have talked about. He has a title that resonates for this idea. Early on in the monarchy, some say it was started by Jayavarman II himself in 802, others say it was later on in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. But, at some point the monarchs of the Khmer began to call themselves not just king, raja, but god king, *devaraja*. As god king, as Vishnu on earth and as the shield and protector of his people, this great warrior decides to build a temple, decorate it with art that will show battles drawn from the Hindu epics, like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The battle scene will be religious, but they will remind everyone of his own career as a great conquering hero. The order was given to these architects, priests architects probably, to lay out a temple that borrowed ideas and forms from earlier Khmer royal temples to Shiva but raise them all to a level never before imagined.

First of all, a great precinct was laid out there in Angkor, in the southeast sector of the city that was about two-thirds of a mile on one side by half a mile on the other, a gigantic plot of land. It was going to have a wall around it, in a great rectangle, again a symbolic religious wall, not a fortification. Within that wall, there was an additional thing to mark off the sacred land on which the temple would be built and probably in which the sort of palace royal city area was going to be erected, although since those building would all have been of wood, we do not have any of them. What was going to be the extra division? A moat, two hundred yards across a great rectangle of water surrounding the central shrine, the central sanctuary. Across that, from one side, from the west, came a sandstone bridge and from the other side, an earthen ramp that would connect to the outside world. Otherwise this new place was an island, a land of its own. An additional wall was arranged around the rectangular shape of the island with four gate pavilions in it, and each one of those gate pavilions is going to mimic the shape of the towering temple in the center in such a way that as one observer pointed out, they both anticipate and conceal the temple itself.

Here we enter into that world of stage management of effects that we have talked about before. As you walk along the causeway you see before you, an overwhelmingly impressive sandstone gatehouse with towering parapets and these beautiful tower tops that are like lotus buds rising up to points. It is only when you get through that gatehouse that you realize that beyond it is the real temple, using some of the same forms but rising far higher with more of the towers, more of the pinnacles, more terraces. You were prepared step by step to be overwhelmed by that temple, in a way that could not have been possible if it had been clearly visible to you the entire time as you approached. Once past that gatehouse, Suryavarman planned that you would arrive at the base of an artificial mountain. That mountain consisted of three terraces. The terraces had galleries and porticos and columned porches all around it. Each of [them had] platforms, and you would go up to the third and from the third sprang this zone of towers. It is called a “quincunx pattern.” Imagine a square with a tower at each of the four corners, but then plant a fifth tower right in the middle—that is our quincunx. The fifth tower in the middle is the tall, the dominant, tower in the group.

Up in that high celestial, ethereal zone, there were spaces where we can imagine that the Hindu rituals and dramatic scenes were played out in religious ceremonies and mimes, that dances—and there were musicians also—were going on there and enlivening the temple again with pageantry, with extraordinary colorful scenes of which the king during his life would also be a part. The kings of the Khmer loved pageantry. We have a lovely description from one of the Chinese ambassadors to the Khmer (they did not write a great deal themselves, but they were certainly written about) that describes the king just coming out of the palace zone and into the city preceded by the army, followed by dancers, then the concubines, then all of the ministers and princes. Finally, the king himself, standing on an elephant, covered in gold and holding a great sword in his hand. This was the entrance of the king into his city, an entrance of great theatricality, great power, and this temple that is being created in the heart of Angkor by Suryavarman. It is going to have spaces; little patios, terraces, galleries, and chambers where similar dramas can be acted out and where similar excitement can be generated, but now in the cause of a religious fervor, of an evoking of the gods of the Hindu religion.

What did all this mean? Every single thing, in fact, has a symbolism behind it. Some of that symbolism is laid out for us on the artwork of Angkor. Unlike Stonehenge which was so bare, and some of our other sites which have lost their art, Angkor has preserved in its stone walls, the record of the religious ideas behind that Hindu faith. The religious ideas that gave life and soul and spirit to this great mass of stones. When you came to the temple itself, crossed that last causeway and got through the gatehouses and up to the temple, you were confronted at eye level with panel after panel of carved reliefs that showed you either scenes of celebration at Suryavarman's court, dominated by the extraordinary troupes of these dancers, these beautiful women in their gorgeous outfits, bare-breasted like our goddesses and priestesses and maidens from Knossos in Crete, an essential part of the ceremony at the court of these great royal feasts and royal presentations in a theatrical sense. They are there and then in amongst them are these scenes of Hindu mythology. We get the great battles between gods and demons, between different mortal clans fighting it out that are described in those Hindu epics. We also see a very formal scene of Suryavarman himself at his court, this god-like figure, in the midst of all of the pageantry that surrounded him as Khmer king.

The most important panel is one that shows a specific scene, a sort of creation scene, from that epic, the *Mahabharata*. It is the scene that is called the churning of the milky ocean, or the churning of the Sea of Milk. It is a scene in which Vishnu helps save the world. Now, Vishnu, who I have not yet described in detail, is a god easily recognizable through the iconography with which he is always presented. He has four arms because he has four symbols, and he needs an arm to hold each symbol. He has one arm for his lotus, one arm for his little discus or wheel, one arm for his conch shell, and one arm for his ceremonial mace, which is both a scepter that represents kingship and a weapon that represents the military force of the king himself. All of these things are the attributes of Vishnu. Vishnu was famous as a preserver of humanity at a time when Shiva was so disgusted by what was going on in this world of humans that he had decided to destroy it. Vishnu approached Shiva and offered himself as a sacrifice, a willing substitute to take on Shiva's wrath, if he would only spare humanity. And thus in this sacrificial way he aligns himself with so many other willing sacrifices that we have

encountered and continue to encounter in human religious beliefs throughout the world and at many different times.

Vishnu then helped save the gods themselves when he becomes a god. There was a time when the great god Indra, a very primeval god in the Hindu pantheon. Let me just say we always think of Hinduism as the ultimate form, the most clear-cut expression of what we call polytheism, many gods, but I am not sure that a Hindu felt that way. Each of these gods is an aspect of god-hood and the godhead, the fountainhead, the source of divine power. Just as Vishnu himself has four different attributes, just as he has different aspects as he looks at different parts of the universe, or appears in different dramas, so the godhood expresses itself in multiple ways. The label of polytheistic is perhaps an external one to place on Hinduism without further consideration. At any rate, Vishnu is going to show himself in a new role. He has first been seen as the willing sacrifice to Shiva, now he appears as the savior of the gods because of something that the old god Indra did. Indra was out riding an elephant. He passed a humble sage by the road, who offered this great monarch of the gods, Indra, a garland. Indra placed it on the trunk of his elephant, and the elephant marched on, but then repelled by the smell of the herbs and the flowers in the garland, the elephant tossed it to the ground. The sage turned out to have been a tremendous natural spirit, force of natural strength. This spirit of nature put a curse upon Indra and all the gods because his garland of flowers had been rejected by the elephant. He said that they would be defeated by the demons of this world. Indeed, there was a great war and the demons won.

The gods came to Vishnu, the preserver, and they asked for his help. He said, I will aid you. We will stir the oceans of the world, the milky oceans around our dwelling place, these mountains where we live, and we will stir up an elixir of immortality, a special nectar which will confer immortality upon all of you as gods. The only trouble is we have to get the demons to join us or there would not be enough strength and enough force to bring that elixir up out of the milky sea. You are going to have to be diplomatic and come to some kind of terms with the demons long enough to enlist their help in churning the milky ocean.

They carry this out; the demons join them, convinced that they are going to share in the elixir of immortality. But no, Vishnu has a trickish side to him, a bit of cleverness and deceit. He has already

promised to the gods, those deva, that they will be the only recipients. He will trick the demons into not being able to get the elixir of immortality. They take this immense serpent, and they tie it around a mountain, a holy mountain, which they set down in the middle of the sea with all the gods on one side of the serpent, on its head, all the demons on the other side at the tail. They are going to pull and push, pull and push, whirling the mountain down in a whirlpool, which will ultimately churn the sea and yield up that elixir of immortality. It works, and then the demons are tricked, except for one who manages to get a few sips of the elixir so at least his head is immortal before Vishnu lops it off, seeing that his own trick has partially failed. That is the head that eats the sun and the moon whenever there is an eclipse and creates darkness over the land. The other demons became not immortal, but in fact mortal and subsidiary to the gods, who are now back in their rightful place and owe Vishnu for preserving them.

Vishnu is a great warrior and a great diplomat and a great trickster, all things that a king needs to be. He is the model for Suryavarman and that is the greatest of the panels on this temple at Angkor that Suryavarman built, is celebrating that scene with the demons and the gods pulling on the opposite ends of the snake and the great Vishnu dancing in the middle to urge them on and cause this elixir of immortality to rise from the milky ocean and become the possession of the gods.

Why does this matter so much at Angkor Wat? It is because the temple itself is an image of the dwelling of the gods. It is an image of the divine cosmic center of Hindu mythology, Mount Meru. Just as the Greeks believed that their gods dwelled on Mount Olympus, Hindu religion placed the gods on five-peaked mountain, Mount Meru in the center of the world. The axis of the world pass through Mount Meru. There was an east-west axis, a north-south axis, and these were represented in our architecture of our great temple at Angkor by the straight lines and the causeways that divided the rectangle of the holy ground. The five peaks of Mount Meru were the five towers, each one crowned by a lotus form at the center of the temple on the highest of the three terraces. Where is the Sea of the Milk? It is our moat. It is our great artificial ocean that is running around this whole complex. In this way we have a mirror of a mythological cosmos brought down to earth at the service of the



worship of Vishnu but also at the service of this king, this great monarch Suryavarman.

We come to the idea of making this his mortuary monument, his pyramid, if you will. How does he do that? How does he join together the idea of the worship of the immortal god Vishnu and this idea of the tomb where his body will be kept and honored for all eternity? He did it by certain changes to the normal temple scheme. All previous temples at Angkor had faced east toward the rising sun. They are just like Greek temples and many others around the world so that the rising sun illuminates the façade of the temple and shines straight into the door if it is open, usually on to the face of the statue itself that is inside. The great temple of Suryavarman II reverses that and faces instead toward the west, the setting of the sun. That is where souls go in the primeval Khmer mythology. They go west with the setting sun so it is now become, by simple orientation, a mortuary temple.

There is more to it than that. When the Brahmins, the priestly caste of India and of the Hindu religion, are at funerals, there are a number of rituals to perform that are like other rituals, prayers, and offerings. The difference is, in funerals they are done in reverse order, because you are now doing them for a person who has departed this world. The panels at Angkor Wat, the great temple, are meant to be read in the opposite direction from that of all those previous Shiva temples with their artistic layouts, because we are reversing the ritual pattern in this temple. There were subtle clues as to the whole point of the temple and the stone itself would speak of its meaning.

In the center of the temple, originally, on the highest point, was probably the statue of Vishnu himself. Today it is down in one of the gate pavilions, but we probably need to imagine it being up on the top. One archaeological conservation project at the great temple found an urn in the central part of the temple, which they believe may have been originally, before it was looted, the container in which the mortal remains of Suryavarman II were laid at the point where he departed from this life and was subsumed into Vishnu as an immortal on the other side.

Through all these things, and through what must have been a very heavy endowment to keep the dances, the singing, the offerings and the ceremonies going, Suryavarman II thought he had achieved immortality. He too would partake of that elixir, that nectar churned

up from the Sea of Milk by the magic mountain, that he himself had made an image of on earth. He would join the gods as Vishnu and continue to be worshiped. I am sure his conviction was just as strong as the conviction of Khufu, that his central pyramid surrounded by the temples and the sacred precinct would continue to be a place of worship for all time. It did not work out for either one of them. In the case of Suryavarman, ironically, his temple was ultimately taken over for the Buddhist faith. Vishnu was taken from his central place and put in a gatehouse. Buddhist pilgrims came now through the centuries to this, what was now after 1431, an abandoned city in the heart of the jungle. All the rest of the city went back to the forest, vines, and trees growing over it. Only the great central temple of Suryavarman's building remained, a pilgrimage center, the Buddhists now replacing those Hindu gods with images of the Buddha and worshiping there. Yet, Suryavarman did achieve immortality. I am speaking of him today. Millions visit his tomb temple every year. It was not the immortality that he dreamed of, but his sacred landscape still attracts from the ends of the earth, people who come to marvel at the achievements of this greatest of Khmer kings.

## Lecture Thirty

### The Stone Heads of Easter Island

#### Scope:

Starting in about 400 A.D., the people of Easter Island in the South Pacific began to create one of the world's most remarkable sacred landscapes. Around the coast of their island, they constructed long, rectangular platforms of stone, called ahu. Atop each ahu stood a row of towering stone figures whose heads faced inland. The statues weighed up to six tons each and were carved of soft, volcanic stone from a quarry in the crater of Rano Raraku. Archaeologists discovered burials inside the ahu, strongly suggesting that each monument marked the territory of a clan and that the stone heads represented honored ancestors. The sacred landscape thus also reflected the geographical territories claimed by the different tribal divisions. In about 1500 A.D., a new cult that worshiped birds and eggs appeared on the island. The convoluted cultural and religious history of Easter Island has been investigated by such explorers as Thor Heyerdahl, but many fundamental questions remain unanswered.

#### Outline

- I. In this lecture, our site is Easter Island.
  - A. The people of this island developed a unique religious cult with forms and elements never seen off the island itself.
  - B. The great stone heads are the symbol of Easter Island.
- II. The original homeland of Easter Island's people is the subject of controversy.
  - A. Thor Heyerdahl was a diffusionist and believed Egypt's pyramids began the tradition of monumental, religious stone buildings worldwide.
  - B. The other school of thought has always been that Easter Island's people are Polynesian.
  - C. The question of the islanders' original homeland bears a great deal on the religion of Easter Island.

- III. Heyerdahl felt that the likeliest parallels to the stone heads were the monumental heads and carved stone figures of Peru.
  - A. He measured, drew, and photographed many of the 745 Easter Island heads.
  - B. He traced the statues' path from the volcanic crater Rano Raraku, where they were made, down to the sea, finding statues that had been left in position all along the way.
  - C. He found stone platforms, called ahu, that seemed to be the same kind of ceremonial platform found on other Pacific Islands and felt that the heads were meant to sit on them.
  - D. He excavated some of the heads, called moai, and discovered that they have bodies, though they lack legs.
  - E. Heyerdahl also discovered about 100 bright orange topknots that were meant to go on the heads of these statues.
  - F. Some of the statues had eyes made of a white stone that were inserted into carved sockets.
  - G. The islanders told him about another rock-carving cult called Rano Kao, which featured birdmen and whose rituals were still conducted.
- IV. Jo Anne Van Tilburg developed a different model for Easter Island's history and religion.
  - A. Her model is based on the evidence that the people came from Polynesia around 300 A.D.
  - B. They would have had a supreme chief or a cluster of chiefs, each of whom claimed descent from a god, and the people were probably divided into clans.
  - C. They would have shared beliefs with other peoples of Polynesia.
    1. Mana is a spiritual force that resides in certain places, things, and people.
    2. *Tapu* (taboo) is the idea that certain things are set apart for ritual, ceremonial, or religious purposes and must not be touched or used in an ordinary way.
    3. Tiki is the god of carvers found throughout Polynesia.
    4. Ancestor worship is also practiced.
  - D. Heyerdahl granted the presence of some Polynesian elements, but he believed that there had been another group, the Long Ears, from South America.

- V. Van Tilburg finally showed that everybody on Easter Island derived from Polynesia and described their practices thus.
- The process of creating, moving, and erecting the heads was in itself something sacred.
  - They were repeatedly moved and sometimes deliberately broken, thus ensuring continual activity.
  - Some of the rituals probably took place on the ahus, such as dancing and sacrifices.
  - The dead were wrapped up and placed on ahus to decompose, so that their bones could be gathered; thus each statue represented an ancestor.
  - The religious life of Easter Island must have been like this from about the time when the first head was created, around 700, until 1500.
- VI. The island was a sacred landscape.
- There were perhaps 19 or 20 different clans on the island that each created an ahu, from which you could look back at the lands that belonged to that clan.
  - Honored ancestors would be carved in volcanic stone, which required tremendous effort to be carved and dragged across the island and erected on ahus.
  - Ongoing veneration and worship occurred through the offerings, the dance, and the introduction of each new dead member of the clan into the protective aura of those ancestors, now transformed into enduring images of stone.
- Suggested Reading:**  
 Heyerdahl, *Aku-Aku*.  
 Van Tilburg, *Easter Island*.
- Questions to Consider:**
- To what extent has archaeology been able to “make the stone heads speak”?
  - Why might the Easter Islanders have destroyed or overturned the moai in the 18<sup>th</sup> century?

## Lecture Thirty—Transcript

### The Stone Heads of Easter Island

Welcome back. We're going to conclude our review of some remarkable sacred landscapes in this lecture with a visit to the remotest spot of land on earth: Easter Island. It's in the South Pacific, and it is 2,000 miles from the South American mainland and more than 1,000 miles from the nearest other inhabited island. Yet on this remote islet, punctuated by three volcanic cones of the volcanic mountains that surged up from the Pacific floor and created that little triangular land mass, on this island there developed a unique religious cult, a unique artistic movement, a unique emblem of the endless creativity of humans that makes us think of those islanders on Malta or Crete, people who came from a broad stream of humanity or cultural impulses on a mainland somewhere and yet who developed out there, on the isolation of their island home, a culture which has brand-new forms and elements never seen off the island itself.

Easter Island is famous for that, and of course everyone has seen those heads, those great stone heads, which are still the symbol of Easter Island. They were, at one time, dotted around the landscape, pulled over, lying on grassy slopes. Many of them have now been re-erected in their presumed original positions so that if you visit the island today, you are probably seeing something more in line with what you would have seen eight or nine hundred years ago than any time over the last five centuries.

Easter Island has been the subject of a great controversy on the question of what was the original homeland of those people. The author who cut the most prominent profile in the public eye and who was most successful in popularizing his view on the matter was an explorer, an adventurer, and amateur archaeologist named Thor Heyerdahl, who, in a series of dramatic voyages in reconstructed ancient craft, tried to prove his ideas about where people came from.

He was a diffusionist. He had very religious ideas in terms of how various cults would have spread throughout the world. He did believe in the primacy of Egypt and its pyramids at the beginning of the tradition of monumental stone building and great religious observances in terms of monuments. And through a series of raft voyages, drift voyages, reconstructed ship voyages, he tried to show how Egyptians could have first crossed the Atlantic in reed boats, such

as we see in images on Egyptian tombs. And then how their descendants, having developed the pyramids of Mexico and Peru, would have left the Peruvian coast on balsa rafts—balsa wood being that wonderfully buoyant wood that many young people use to make their model airplanes. They would have launched, in Thor Heyerdahl's scenario, from the coast of Peru. They would have ventured out into the Pacific Ocean, and they would have carried some of the ideas of large stone architecture all the way out to Easter Island and beyond.

Thor Heyerdahl was not an armchair theorist. He was among the first to go to Easter Island and carry out a survey and interview local people intensively and try to reconstruct how it all came about. So he represents one strand of thought. We will return to Thor Heyerdahl in a moment.

But the other strand of thought has always been that the people are Polynesian. Polynesia is a word meaning "many islands" and it describes that vast scatter of islands and archipelagos throughout the Pacific, most of them inhabited, and most of the inhabitants clearly coming from Southeast Asia. We were talking about Angkor and Java, the island that at one time dominated Angkor and Southeast Asia. Well, Java is just the far end of a vast swarm of islands that reaches all the way to Easter Island, all the way up to the Aleutians, includes very familiar places like Hawaii and Tahiti, Bora Bora, Samoa, Tonga—all these are Pacific Islands. Way down in the south and west corner of the Pacific you get Australia and New Zealand, sort of bracketing that corner. It's a sort of a third of the globe that is watery and oceanic, dotted with these small pieces of land, most of which were settled, as is very clear from archaeology and from local traditions, from Asia out, spreading eastward into the Pacific. And those voyages were made in fantastic outrigger canoes with sails and paddles, containing settlers and all their goods—their chickens, their seeds for their domestic crops, all the things they needed to start a new life on the next piece of land over the horizon. Most people have believed that the Easter Islanders came from that direction, that they came from out in the Pacific and moved east to Easter Island, rather than Thor Heyerdahl's idea that they started on the mainland of South America and came west.

The point has a great deal of bearing on the religion of Easter Island. If Thor Heyerdahl is right, and it derives from South America—and even beyond that, Egypt—then we need to posit one set of religious

background materials to explain Easter Island. One set of ideas, one set of myths, and one set of original sort of religious concepts. But if they came from Polynesia, those original Easter Islanders, it's a completely different religious background. And since what evolved on Easter Island was itself unique, we desperately want to find out what was the sort of ground, the culture, the essential bedrock on which this unique Easter Island religion is going to be erected.

So let's look quickly at Thor Heyerdahl's work, because he was a very flamboyant figure and is still quoted sometimes today in popular books about Easter Island. And he had a way with creating new versions of myths that really stuck in people's minds and helped people think about the past in a very exciting way. He probably made more people think about Easter Island with his books *Aku-Aku* and *Kon-Tiki* than had ever thought about Easter Island before.

Now, Thor Heyerdahl approached the islands from a point of view of where had he seen similar heads, great big stone heads. He focused on that idea. And he felt that the likeliest parallels were on the side of the Pacific toward the Americas, that things like the Olmec heads of Mexico, that certain monumental heads and carved stone figures that he had seen in Peru—and we talked about what a succession of cultures that there had been in Peru before the Inca—that these were the likeliest source of the people and the artistic tradition that he saw when he went to Easter Island in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. He was, of course, just one of a long string of European visitors. It got its name from a set of Dutch sailors several hundred years ago who happened catch a glimpse of Easter Island on an Easter Sunday and gave it that name.

But the name that the people on Easter Island had for their island was Rapa Nui, and it was to Rapa Nui that Thor Heyerdahl came with an expedition, a ship, Norwegian friends, but in fact an international team determined to measure and map the heads, try to understand how they had fit in to the local religion and landscape, interview the people, collect local traditions, and see what could be discovered by going beyond what could be seen in a few days' visit into reconstructing the religion of this amazing island. And he had some amazing achievements, although that overall premise, that it all derives from South America, has not been accepted by any archaeologist that I know of. Let's talk about what he did.

First of all, he did measure, draw, and photograph many of these giant heads. How many are there? There are about 745 huge heads

dotted over the landscape of this small island, each one carved out of volcanic stone. He went up to the quarry on the volcanic crater that is called Rano Raraku, and he documented there the place where the heads had been carved. He could show them in every stage of preparation, from being chipped into the rock with some hard stone tools, initially by pecking and grinding, and then gradually, after the outline has been created in the sheer face of a volcanic outcrop—a sort of cliff-like vertical face—then the statue would be undercut and gradually emerge as a three-dimensional form held, lying flat, by a spine of volcanic material until it was completely molded all around. And then that final spine of volcanic stone that held it to the matrix would be cut through and the statue would be removed.

Up in that quarry on Rano Raraku he was able to show that there were still the tools lying around. He found local people who were willing to come up and work on the statues, singing the chants that they said had always been sung to go along with that work by their ancestors. These people seem to have inherited, in Thor Heyerdahl's view, a tremendous amount of lore and memory about the past of their island. Then he found, leading down from Rano Raraku, a sort of a road across the grassy slopes of the island. All the trees that were there when the original islanders arrived, about A.D. 300, are long gone. It was, in Thor Heyerdahl's time, an island of grass. Now there are some more trees that are being grown there. At any rate, he traced the path of the statues from the quarry where they were made, down to the side of the sea, which was their ultimate destination, finding all along the way statues that had been left in position, sometimes raised up and gazing out over the sea, buried usually almost up to their necks, but others who had made it all the way down to the sea. And he found, around the island, these stone platforms. Now, the locals gave them a name, "ahu," which seemed to apply to the same kind of ceremonial platform that was found on other Pacific Islands, which we'll talk about when we look into the Pacific Islander and Polynesian origin theory for Easter Island.

At any rate, he was fascinated by the ahu because he felt that, although in early times there were no statues on them, the positions of some of the fallen statues suggested to Thor Heyerdahl that those had been the platforms, those had been the sort of pedestals, that the heads were carved to sit upon. They had been created to be placed in rows upon these long rectangular stone platforms down by the sea. And the Dutch, who'd visited first, had seen many of them still in place, still

standing. When the British came later in the 1700s, they'd all been thrown down or deliberately overturned. He thought they belonged there again. And he decided to both replace one and also to show how the thing might have been done with the simple tools and equipment available to Easter Islanders right there in their own home. So he organized some enthusiastic work crews and after going around the island and checking out some of these sacred heads, which are called moai—he even excavated some, because, as I said, many of them were buried up to their necks, and he wanted to see what the whole thing looked like—and he discovered that if you went on down, they were more than just heads, that famous impression, worldwide preconception, "Easter Island heads." They are heads on bodies. It's true that they lacked legs, but they came right down to chests, bellies, long feather-like fingers folded across the bellies, sometimes a suggestion of genitals, and sometimes some marks on the back like a dorsal fin or in one case a three-masted boat or ship carved into the chest of a figure that Thor Heyerdahl inevitably called the navigator. There was a lot more to those heads than had met the eye carved out of that volcanic stone littered around the island.

He picked a fairly small one, and simply with ropes dragging them across the grass, which turned out to be a good surface to drag on, and to some extent using wooden rollers—although in the absence of trees these can't have been very important or played much of a role during the island's time of deforestation—but at any rate, mainly simply by pulling across the grass—again, singing chants, using music and a sense of celebration—he got one of the smaller moai from the place on the slope where he found it down to one of the ahu, the stone platforms. And, using a very simple technique, which may have been used at Stonehenge in order to raise the sarsen stones, they erected that. What was the technique? Again, it did involve long pieces of wood as levers. They put a stone near the head of the recumbent statue, which was lying face down, and using that stone as the fulcrum, they inserted a piece of wood underneath and raised the stone and began to pack smaller stones underneath. And continuing that process, raising it, levering it higher just a little bit at a time, they got it up and back on its ahu.

This has more than a technical interest, because that statue put back on its ahu is now the symbol for us of a return of the sacred symbols of Easter Island to their original place. And since Heyerdahl's time, many of them have gone back in rows, so that we're beginning to see

the landscape now as the Easter Islanders of a thousand years ago would have seen it. And that's important for us, because as we will see, these ahus, sacred stone platforms, and these moai, the great so-called heads but in fact these stone bodies, these figures, combine to shape this landscape in a very specific way on ritual lines. Now, Heyerdahl discovered, as others had noted before him, that the bare head was not necessarily what was originally pictured. There are about 750 of the moai, but we have about 100 bright orange topknots that were meant to go on the heads of these statues, either representing coiled red hair or some sort of a ceremonial hat. These were dotted around, sometimes right out in the surf, and he managed to get one on top of a statue. Also, some of them had eyes, and these were carved out of a white stone and inserted into the sockets that were carved into the volcanic stone itself. So he helped to bring these seemingly enigmatic, silent, brooding statues back to life.

Now, Thor Heyerdahl seems to have had a gift for getting people to open up to him. He was a very intense, a blazingly fervent person about his theories. Once he latched on to an idea he pursued it with a sort of terrier-like consistency and drive and determination. And that seemed to make him very appealing to the islanders. He was not like the typical anthropologist with a notebook and a dry manner and an interest in just the facts; he wanted stories. He wanted legends, myths, rituals, songs. Life was a banquet, and he wanted to taste every dish, and he encouraged them to help him in this quest. And so they opened up to him in a way that they had not to other people, and they explained to him that there were other cults; that those great moai were one cult, but there was another. And they took him up to another of the volcanoes, it was called Rano Kao, and on Rano Kao they showed him rock carving. We've seen rock art in a number of areas now, from Scandinavia to the Kalahari Desert. There's rock art on Easter Island that had not been well documented before Thor Heyerdahl's arrival. And it seemed to show a cult different from that of the great stone sculptures. It featured birdmen: men in bird masks, bird wings, bird paraphernalia, dancing, surrounded by symbols. He chalked in the outlines and took photographs of them. And then down in a little volcanic cave near some of the rock carvings he was shown small, portable carvings of different symbols, of birds, of death's heads, all kinds of things that were part of this other cult.

And he was told about ceremonies that were still conducted in this birdman cult, such as that the young men of Easter Island, at the time

when the migrating birds came through and landed on offshore rocks to nest, the young men would have a competition, a sacred race, swimming over to these islands, trying to be the first to seize an egg and bring it back to the mainland. He documented all this. He wrote up his book. He filed his report. He sailed off on some raft voyages to show that it was technically possible to get by balsa raft from the coast of South America out into the Pacific. And then he moved on to other projects.

In the wake of his visit, other archaeologists came. Chief among them has been Jo Anne Van Tilburg of the University of California at Los Angeles, an archaeologist who devoted years to patient study of every aspect of Easter Island: the ecology, the local traditions, the genetics of the people, all the traces of the religion. And Van Tilburg has developed a completely different model for Easter Island history and for Easter Island religion, based on the idea that the people came from Polynesia, and that they are part of that great movement in the outrigger canoes from Polynesia. The language is Polynesian. All the genetic links are to Polynesia. And when one begins to look at specific crops and aspects of material culture, those are Polynesian, too. Even the ahu, those stone platforms which Heyerdahl thought were unique to Easter Island, have their antecedents in ceremonial stone platforms and plaza surfaces made of stone that dot the islands of Polynesia wherever the traditional ancestral Polynesian religion was spread.

So Van Tilburg, once she had identified the source, felt that she knew some things about the original Easter Islanders, those colonists, those intrepid seafarers who came and settled on Easter Island around 300 A.D. They would have probably had a supreme chief or a cluster of chiefs, each one of whom claimed descent from a god. They were probably divided into clans. That is a very typical social arrangement, the typical social arrangement of Polynesia. We may remember the New Zealand tradition that every Maori of New Zealand—the original inhabitants of the island before the British came—could tell you in exactly which canoe, which ancestral colonizing canoe, his or her own ancestors had landed on that island. So that sense of clan and descent is very strong there, and Tilburg believed that that was at the back of Easter Island society as well. And then there were the religious beliefs. There would have been a religious belief in what the Polynesians call mana, sacred force, something inherent in the landscape and in the objects of the landscape, kind of an idea of animism—everything has its own force,



its own spirit, its own invisible power. But mana resides particularly in certain places, certain things, and certain people. That was one aspect. And another was what's called *tapu*, or in our word, taboo, the idea that certain things are set apart for ritual, ceremonial, or religious purposes and must not be touched or used in an ordinary way. Finally, there was a god of carvers found throughout the Polynesian realm; his name was Tiki. Heyerdahl borrowed that name for one of his experimental rafts, calling it Kon-Tiki, and turning things around and assuming that Tiki actually came from South America. But he is a uniquely Polynesian deity. He was probably brought to the islands as well.

We also have to say, in a larger sense, ancestor worship probably came along with the Polynesians. It's very typical that the Polynesians, like many of the people we've considered as we study these ancient religions, revered the dead, remembered their ancestors with great vividness and detail, and carried out rites surrounding the remains of those ancestors that would keep their memory alive and show them continued respect through the ages. All of this would have come along as a Polynesian cultural package with those first fleets of canoes in about 300.

Thor Heyerdahl had heard stories that he interpreted as being clues to a second migration on the island, or at least two different populations. He granted the presence of some Polynesian elements in Easter Island's culture. But he believed that there had been another group, whom he called the Long Ears. And since some of the great statues show these elongated ears, as if the ear had been pierced and then the lobe artificially elongated by putting weights or stretchers in it—this is a style found in a number of different societies—these Long Ears had come from South America, he said, and created the statues. And the Short Ears, the Polynesians, had ultimately overcome them and thrown the statues down and instituted the birdman cult in its place.

Van Tilburg was able to show that everybody on Easter Island derived from Polynesia. Although there may indeed have been war on Easter Island, though there certainly were signs of conflict, destruction, as the resources ran out, the trees were cut down, and the island grew drier and less productive and all hope of getting away from it again gradually vanished, she was able, nonetheless, to show a Polynesian unity to the background. So let's now get into her

interpretation of those monumental and world-famous stone figures, now from a Polynesian perspective. The first thing that Van Tilburg believed was that the process of creating the heads, the process of moving them, the process of erecting them, was in itself something sacred. These weren't mere statues created in a quarry to be set up in a single place with one destiny, to passively remain there through time. She noticed signs that they were repeatedly moved, sometimes deliberately broken, and that early on in the tradition, some statues must have deliberately broken, because parts of their heads had been built into the ahu, the ceremonial platforms of later constructions.

So she replaced the sort of monolithic static idea of "this is supposed to be a ring of platforms around the island with stone heads facing in, and it's just a matter of completing that picture before everything is all finished and we can put a period at the end of the sentence." There was no period. There was no conclusion. There was only intended to be a continual activity, a ritual activity of making heads, moving heads, setting heads up, putting them on ahus down by the sea, venerating those heads, having sacrifices on the ahus. But it was supposed to be active, dynamic, something, again, that I think we've seen again and again in our review of the archaeological evidence.

Second, using Polynesian antecedents Van Tilburg was able to identify some of the rituals that probably took place on the ahus. Certainly dancing would have been very important. The Polynesian society, I think more than any other in the world, although many did include dancing, right back to the Old Testament patriarchs and their societies, but dancing was something that every visitor to Polynesia noticed as an essential element of the religious cult. And the ahus would have been perfect platforms or stages on which those ceremonial and ritual dances could have been performed, and from which they could have been watched by people seated or standing or dancing themselves on the slopes that ran up toward the interior of the island.

Then there was the idea of the preparation of the dead. The dead, apparently, were wrapped up and then placed on these ahus. And their bodies would gradually decompose there and their bones could then be gathered and placed, more permanently, down in caves or in sacred places. And the ahus were places of sacrifices and offerings because, in Van Tilburg's view, each of these big stone figures represented an ancestor. She agreed with Heyerdahl that they were specific people. They did differ in terms of their physiognomy and

the attributes that they were given. And she felt that each one was an honored ancestor, and that they had a lively spiritual life after death, very much as Egyptian souls did, and that their enduring nature was represented by the big head, the big statue itself. So she emphasized the activities. She emphasized the rituals. She emphasized all of the ceremonies that surrounded the making and erection and veneration of these familiar figures, and in this way built up an extraordinarily in-depth and colorful picture of what the religious life of Easter Island must have been like from about the time when the first head was created, which can be radiocarbon dated back to about 700 A.D., until the cult waned, which was about 1500 A.D. So about 800 years of this activity on the island, centered around these great figures and those platforms.

Now, in what way is this a sacred landscape? Well, let's think all the way back to our megaliths in Lecture Six, there in Atlantic Europe. We decided that each megalith was a communal tomb for honored ancestors of a certain clan, and that from that immovable stone tomb those ancestral spirits guarded and staked their family's claim, in a very permanent way, to the land over which they presided. That's how we now picture Easter Island: That there were perhaps 19 or 20 different clans on the island who would come in those canoes. That they had each created an ahu, a stone platform, down by the sea at the edge, the seaward edge, of their territory; an ahu from which you would look back inland, up the slope, at the lands that belonged to that clan.

And then, to make it vivid to all the world that this was the territory of that family group, honored ancestors would be carved in volcanic stone. And to show the ancestors how much you respected them, tremendous effort was put into the carving, tremendous effort into the dragging of the stones across the island and erecting them on those ahus. And then ongoing veneration and worship through the offerings, the dance, and the introduction of each new dead member of the clan into the protective aura of those ancestors now transformed from ordinary humans, like the islanders themselves, into gigantic, superhuman, enduring images of stone, gazing inland for all eternity, as they hoped, upon the lands that they had first sighted all those years ago, rising from the waters of the Pacific, and to which they still continued through the centuries to stake their claim.

## Lecture Thirty-One

### Tending Zoroaster's Sacred Fire in Iran

#### Scope:

In our modern world, "revealed" religions predominate: religions first preached by a divine figure, prophet, or reformer and then actively spread. The oldest such faith today may be Zoroastrianism, dating back beyond 600 B.C. to the revelations of Zarathustra (called Zoroaster by the Greeks). Zoroaster taught about cosmic dualities: Light versus Darkness, Truth versus Lie, and Good versus Evil. Converts to his religion revered fire as a divine symbol. The spiritual hearth of the religion lay at the isolated city of Takht-i Sulaiman near the Caspian Sea, where Iranian kings and magi tended the sacred flame. Rediscovered in 1819, the identity of the ruined city remained unknown until 1959, when archaeologists unearthed texts on clay tablets. In the days when Persian kings ruled a great empire, Zoroastrianism appeared destined to become a great world religion. Today, the Parsees of India are its main surviving community.

#### Outline

- I. In our final section, we change our focus to the religions that dominate the world today.
  - A. They are mostly "revealed" religions that can be traced back to specific founder figures.
    1. Zoroastrianism was revealed through Zoroaster.
    2. Judaism was revealed through Abraham and Moses.
    3. Buddhism was revealed through the Buddha.
    4. Christianity was revealed through Jesus.
    5. Islam was revealed through Mohammad.
  - B. In each case, religion became a creed, a set of beliefs.
    1. Creeds discuss the nature of the gods.
    2. They talk about observances of certain rituals, prayers, sacrifices, and religious days.
    3. They may discuss matters of ritual purity.
  - C. Ethics are very important to all of these faiths.



- II. Zoroastrianism makes the dualities of right and wrong clearest.**
- Zoroaster founded his faith no later than about 600 B.C.
  - The Achaemenid kings of Persia are the first people showing signs of being adherents, calling themselves gardeners and their supreme god Ahura-Mazda; they also venerated fire.
  - From Greek historians, we know the kings went to war accompanied by magi, who carried altars on which sacred fires were burning and who watched the stars.
  - We learn about Zoroaster himself through about 15 Gathas, or hymns. In one of them, Zoroaster hints at something that is made explicit in the Avesta, the Zoroastrian sacred text.
    - He had a vision of Ahura-Mazda, who instructed him in three dualities: Light versus Darkness, Truth versus Lie, and Good versus Evil.
    - Ahura-Mazda's great enemy was Ahrima, who is the Lie, Darkness, and Evil.
    - Each of us must decide whose side we are on.
  - Certain elements of older Indo-European faith were rejected, such as the gods of war, Indra and Mitra.
  - Zoroaster also instituted a regimen of reciting the Gathas at five specific times of day in the presence of light or fire.
- III. How do we see Zoroastrianism through archaeology?**
- We find it in the symbolism surrounding the Achaemenid kings of Persia.
  - Zoroastrianism then went underground for a while, although the activities of the magi were still well known.
  - There was a great resurgence in Zoroastrianism during the Parthian dynasty.
  - The faith survived many vicissitudes; as part of the holy wars, the pacifism of Zoroaster was forgotten.
  - The Sassanid dynasty made spreading the Zoroastrian faith a prime element in their campaign, and fire became an important element of their state religion.

- IV. Takht-i Sulaiman, the "Throne of Solomon," is a hilltop with a circular lake fed by thermal springs, surrounded by a circular city, surrounded by a circular wall.**
- The site was well known as a Mongol stronghold. There was also an older Sassanid city with a palace and a temple and, even earlier, an Achaemenid village.
  - German archaeologists discovered clay tablets that showed this was the site of the Sassanid sacred fire of kings and warriors: Gushnasp.
  - On the north side of the lake, they found a great hole in a floor where the fire altar may have been taken out and a room where ashes may have been gathered for distribution to pilgrims.
  - They found the ceremonial way where each Sassanian king would walk barefoot up the slope of the hill, following the example of King Khosrau, the site's founder.
  - Our community of the spirit in this case was the Sassanian king and the pilgrims who visited the site.
  - The site was used from Sassanian times up through the Mongol invasions, but worshipers ultimately left because of persecution and became the people now known as Parsees.
- V. The site is geologically interesting.**
- It looks like Mount Olympus, in Turkey, where fire spouted naturally from the mountainside and travertine flowed from thermal springs.
  - These features are repeated at Takht-i Sulaiman, carrying us back to some of our earliest thoughts about the earth itself being the source of religion.

### Questions to Consider:

- Which aspects of Zoroastrianism seem to anticipate innovative features of Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam?
- Why should fire have been chosen as the symbol of the god Ahura-Mazda?

## Lecture Thirty-One—Transcript

### Tending Zoroaster's Sacred Fire in Iran

Welcome back. With this lecture, we embark together on the last leg of our long journey through archaeological sites that reveal to us some of the important developments in the world of human religion. And we are going to change our focus now from those religions of the past, those tribal religions, the religions into which people were born and they accepted unquestioningly as they did their language, their territory, their own identity within the society. It was something inherited, along with all of the other cultural components that made up that particular community.

We are now moving into the world of religions that dominate the world today. And these are religions often of choice, religions of conversion, religions to which people adhere consciously having made a decision: That is what I believe in. Now, those religions that dominate the world's scene today, with one exception, tend to be in the class that are called "revealed" religions. We've encountered some individuals, rulers to whom God spoke through dreams and visions, so we know that back there in the earlier world, there was a sense that you could have important spiritual and religious truths revealed to you by the gods themselves. An example of that would be Tutmosis, asleep under the Sphinx and being personally addressed by Horus of the horizon and given a task: Clear my statue of sand. Or we can think of Pachacuti again, there in Cuzco, receiving the words of Inti, the sun, in a dream.

But we are now talking about religious reformers who through time have created the faiths, the creeds that many people in the world live by today. One of the great world religions, of course, we've already touched on. When we were at Angkor and looking at that great temple, we were aware that it had been dedicated by Suryavarman II to a specific god in a choice that he made. Breaking with tradition, he made that great temple at Angkor sacred to Vishnu—he regarded himself as the incarnation of Vishnu. All of his predecessors had worshiped instead Shiva, and created temples to that god. Hinduism is the all-embracing name that we give to that faith in which Shiva and Vishnu and Indra and many of those other gods of the familiar Hindu pantheon play such an important role. That is not a revealed religion, but it is one that is very important in the world today.

The religions we'll be looking at in the sixth and final part of our course, which I have called "Communities of the Spirit," are religions that can be traced back to specific founder figures to whom the truth was revealed and who shared that revelation with all people, making it possible, in most cases, for anyone to become part of that religion by choice. Now, there are some exceptions to this. Some of these religions are tied also to national identities. But in general, this is what separates the revealed faiths from those older traditional religions linked to family, clan, band, tribe, nation that were just part of your identity.

So, let's have a quick review of which revealed faiths we are speaking about. There would be Judaism, revealed through Abraham and Moses. Zoroastrianism, which is the focus of our first lecture right now, which was revealed by a prophet named Zoroaster, called by the Greeks Zarathustra, and you'll sometimes see his name written in that way. He may have lived about 600 B.C.; he may have lived long before that. We'll talk about the archaeological and linguistic evidence for when this particular founder figure actually taught. We then go on to Buddhism, founded by the figure called the Buddha, the Enlightened One, who was actually a prince in India named Gautama. Then Jesus, founder of Christianity. And finally, we go forward a little bit and we come to Mohammad, founder of Islam.

With those faiths, those five faiths, we have a set of religions that now dominate the world scene, along with Hinduism from that older set of faiths. And they differ in a significant way, not just in the matter of consciously being chosen by people and certainly consciously being held onto by people in the face of persecution—which all of those faiths have experienced at different times, or members of all of those faiths. They also have a different kind of approach to what religion is.

For the first time now, religion becomes a creed, a set of beliefs, things you believe in. So that it's possible for people to look at you and not be aware of what religion you adhere to because it's going on in your mind, in your thoughts, in your beliefs. Those creeds—and that word comes from the Latin *credo*, "I believe"—those creeds will often talk about the nature of the gods: how they were created, exactly what are their identities, and what is their relationship to the world and people living in it. Creeds will talk about observances of certain rituals, prayers, sometimes (though much less so in these

revealed religions) sacrifices, and certain days on which religious observances are marked by adherence of that faith. Matters of ritual purity may be in the creeds.

Ethics suddenly appear. Right and wrong become very important. Lists of the things you must not do if you will be a saved person who in a redeemed way will go into paradise, heaven, a beautiful existence after this life. There have been bits and pieces of those thoughts in previous religions. We can think of the Egyptian Book of the Dead, which is steering the soul through the Duat, the underworld, and includes a judgment scene. But in the Book of the Dead, if you know the right answers to that immense negative confession of the things you did not do in life, the knowing the right answers is more important than what you actually did. The feeling of true morality is less important than being prepared with a road map that will guide you through that difficult encounter with the great beings after your death. The elemental idea of right and wrong, of Good and Evil, Light vs. Darkness, Truth vs. Lie, becomes very strong with these revealed religions. And let's start with the one that makes that set of dualities more clear than any other, and that is the religion preached by Zoroaster, this great prophet who lies behind the religion called, after him, Zoroastrianism.

As I said, some people would put his dates around 600 B.C. Certainly the first set of people who seem to show us the signs of being adherents to Zoroaster's religion, with its supreme deity, Ahura-Mazda, its veneration of fire, its belief in serving the truth and rejecting the lie, a very simple creed, they are the Achaemenid kings of Persia—kings with familiar names like Cyrus, Darius, Xerxes, the kings known from their encounters with the Greeks and written about in great detail by Greek observers and Greek enemies of their kingdom. The tie to Persia, that realm of which those monarchs served as kings, great kings, is going to be central to Zoroastrianism. It will be associated from that day to this with the land of Persia and with the Persian people, although it ultimately spread to many others. Zoroaster, as I said, was believed by some to have lived around the time that the Persian Empire was being formed. Cyrus himself belongs to the early 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C., and he seems to spread this faith, this simple faith of Ahura-Mazda, the supreme god of Zoroaster, wherever he goes.

On the other hand, we have to remark that the Persians adhere to an approach to religion that is called henotheism. That's not a very common term because it's not a very common religious outlook. You'll recognize that "theism" as the word for the system for thinking about god, as in monotheism (one god), polytheism (many gods), or atheism (no god). This theism that was part of the henotheistic idea is that you have your own god, you have your own faith, and yet you accept the religions of others.

And certainly it was true that within the great Persian Empire, the largest empire the world had ever seen up until that date—which reached from the Indus Valley in Pakistan all the way to Macedonia in northern Greece and from Arabia and Egypt all the way up into the Russian steppes and which included many people—religious freedom was the order of the day. There were those who adopted Zoroastrianism. It did become a great world religion at that time, with probably millions of adherents. When you think of the chunk of the world and its population that's covered by that territory, you can think of how grand and important it must have been. But at the same time, other faiths were not merely tolerated, but supported. It belongs to the Persian period, for instance, that famous record in the Old Testament or the Hebrew Bible about Cyrus the Conqueror having conquered Babylon and established Persian rule there sending the Jews back to—they've been in this Babylonian captivity as captives—sending them back to their homeland and even endowing a temple in Jerusalem with money from the Persian treasury, a promise that was ultimately fulfilled in a later reign. So, that is their approach, and this is what makes us think today that they are Zoroastrians.

And there's another element, too, for associating these Persian kings with Zoroaster. They call themselves gardeners. They're the only monarchs I know of that do this. You hear lots of titles like "Defender of the Faith" and "Protector of the Realm," but "the Gardener"? They were very interested in trees and very interested in cultivating the earth and presenting themselves as nurturers, as cultivators, as gardeners. Xerxes, on his way to Greece, stopped by a beautiful sycamore or plain tree and made it a shrine. Well, that gardening essence comes out of Zarathustra's, or Zoroaster's, teaching, where he says that cultivation is good. The nomadic warrior life, the herding life, is less good. It is something that should be turned away from. And there is a beautiful phrase in one of the Gathas, one of those sacred songs attributed to Zoroaster himself:

"He who cultivates crops cultivates righteousness." And the fact that these kings—who do not mention Zoroaster himself in their inscriptions, although they do talk about Ahura-Mazda and show that great god of Zoroastrianism up in a fiery chariot in the sky riding through the heavens—they do not mention him. But the fact that they are calling themselves gardeners, along with their supreme god being Ahura-Mazda and along with their veneration for fire, convinces me they are indeed Zoroastrianists, the first great monarchs to have adopted this faith.

Before I get to Zoroaster himself, let me describe another element of that earliest expression of this religion that we have very vividly described by the Greek historians. When the Persian kings went to war—and certainly the Greeks knew all about that, because they were frequently the targets of those wars, since their Greek lands were at the western fringe of the great Persian Empire—those kings marched along accompanied by holy men who carried altars on which sacred fires were burning. These fire altars belonged to a group of people, one of whom had been called the magus, and if we put that into Latin plural, it is *magi*, Greek plural *magoi*, but in the more familiar English pronunciation, "magi."

These are the figures that appear in the nativity stories in Matthew in the Christian tradition, where they have seen a star—because the magi of the Zoroastrian tradition, the magi of Persia, were star watchers, were venerated of the flame, keepers of the flame, interested in all things to do with heavenly light. We'll talk about why the light of heaven is just as important as the flame in a moment. At any rate, according to Matthew, they saw a star, they followed the star to Bethlehem, and they are the first to venerate the infant Jesus. Martin Luther, who knew his history very well, I think didn't like the picture of these men from another faith, these holy men of the Zoroastrian faith, showing up at the manger. He called them *Weisen*, Wise Men, in his German translation of the Bible, and that is the way they are often referred to; or, to dodge the bullet again, Three Kings, based on the fact that there were three gifts, so there must be three of them to have brought gold, frankincense, and myrrh. We don't know the number of them. We do know that they are the magi, these central figures, these venerated of fire, these protectors of the sacred flame from the Zoroastrian faith.

Now, let's look at Zoroaster himself. We know about him from his own mouth only through about 15 Gathas. These are hymns. They're a little like the biblical Psalms, in honor of the supreme god Ahura-Mazda. And in one of them, Zoroaster hints at something that's made explicit in the later writings which were collected together in a great compilation of books called the Avesta. And one thing we should say about these revealed religions is they tend to be held by people who we can call Peoples of the Book. The revealed religion—and actually, this goes for Hinduism as well, with those great epics, but the revealed religions would be the Zoroastrian Avesta, the Hebrew Torah, the Buddhist text, the Sutras, certainly the Christian Gospels, and the Islamic Koran—it's written down now. It's become intellectualized in the sense that there is a literary text which holds the truth, holds the creed in very specific terms, from which people can depart at their peril or in the desire to create a new sect or a new interpretation, but to which the faithful will adhere.

This core of the Avesta is those very early things, the Gathas, that Zoroaster himself chanted or sang and passed down through time. And they hint at what is later made explicit: He had a vision. He saw the great god Ahura-Mazda, and he was instructed in his vision about Ahura-Mazda. In the earlier Indo-European foreworld—and remember, the Persians are an Indo-European people, like the Hindus of India, and like most of the people living in Europe with the exception of folks like the Basques and the Finns and the Hungarians—these Persians had older gods, and Ahura-Mazda had actually figured in that pantheon, that polytheistic-seeming pantheon of gods. He was plucked out in the vision of Zoroaster, seen as the supreme god, never created because he always was, the sole thing in the universe that always existed, that his symbol was light, and he instructed Zoroaster in these dualities: Light vs. Darkness, Truth vs. the Lie, Good vs. Evil.

Ahura-Mazda was opposed by a great enemy, Ahrima. Ahrima is one of the names for this enemy who is the Lie, who is the Darkness, and who is the Evil. And these two are locked in a contest for the world which Ahura-Mazda created and made perfect and beautiful, but which was sullied, stained, darkened by this evil spirit. And so life is a contest, and each of us must decide whose side are we on: Are we going to be a soldier for Ahura-Mazda or for Ahrima, the force of Darkness, Evil, and the Lie?

Another element that ties our Persians in, as I said, is that the only thing they thought they needed to teach their sons was to ride well, shoot an arrow straight, and tell the truth; something so elemental is that bedrock of what was revealed to Zoroaster. And when he had to refer to the enemy in a simple, straightforward way, he just always referred to the Lie. And we put it with a capital “L” when we write it in English. The Lie is what opposes Ahura-Mazda, the great being.

Certain elements of the older Indo-European faith were rejected. For instance, there were a couple of gods who were war gods. Indra, who we already met riding an elephant in that story that tied in with the churning of the Sea of Milk at Angkor, and Mitra or Mithras, who we will meet in a little bit as we get to Rome and look at the mass of religions that were active and surging around the time that Christianity rose to prominence. Mithraism is descended from him and descended from the Persian pre-Zoroastrian faith. These two gods were rejected by Zoroaster. This is where his reforming quality comes in—that reforming quality which is so strong in most of these founders of religions, that they are here to correct as well as to enlighten—and these gods were condemned along with their war-like ways.

You are a soldier for Ahura-Mazda and for Good and Light and Truth by your own actions. What are you supposed to do? You’re supposed to be modest. You’re supposed to be helpful. You’re supposed till the ground. You’re supposed to be a good member of society. You’re not supposed to be an aesthetic and go off and live on a mountaintop with a strict dietary regime of near starvation, thinking that’s getting you closer to holiness. This is a religion that forces you to stay in this real world, forces you through your own actions and the way you treat others to serve the good. And at the end of time, if humanity will all turn away from Evil, Darkness, and the Lie, the world can be saved, creation can be redeemed and purified, and a new age will begin.

Before we get to the archaeological evidence, one more point about Zoroaster: He wanted people to pray. He instituted through his teachings a regimen of prayer five times a day at five specific hours of the day, each time in the presence of light or fire. So the fire becomes a sacred emblem of Ahura-Mazda. But you can also get it by opening the window to the beams of sunshine coming in or by standing under the starlight or the moon at night, which is why the magi become so important in their astrological functions. During that

time of praying where you recite those Gathas—those ancient, ancient hymns which to archaeologists seem very clearly to date from about 1,000 years before the time that is normally attributed to Zoroaster himself, about 600 B.C.—from those hymns, you would achieve that feeling of peace and unity. You would re-pledge yourself to Zoroaster’s ideal god, prime god, Ahura-Mazda. And you would wear a certain simple dress that was called the path, a simple undergarment—the idea of you being a pilgrim through life—and you would tie and untie a girdle, a cord around your waist that also was tied with that idea of the path, the way.

How do we see Zoroastrianism in archaeology? First of all, we see it in the symbolism surrounding the kings of Persia of the Achaemenid dynasty, that dynasty founded by King Cyrus in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. and finally thrown upon the scrap heap of history by Alexander the Great around 330 B.C. That great dynasty worshiped Ahura-Mazda and placed his image on their monuments.

Zoroastrianism then goes underground for a while, although the activities of the magi are still well known because the Greeks and Romans find them fascinating and write all about them. And they learn about Zoroaster, and they write about him, too. But there’s a great resurgence in Zoroastrianism, first in the time of the Parthian dynasty, those who ruled Persia and opposed the Roman emperors, and then ultimately in the time of the Sassanid or Sassanian dynasty, the kings—like Khosrau, who was a Sassanian king, came to the throne in 531 and ruled to 579 of our era—who make the spreading of the Zoroastrian faith a prime element in their campaign, which on their western border is waged against the Christian emperors of the Byzantine Empire. So it is a faith that has survived many vicissitudes, it’s come up against many other faiths, and it’s part of holy wars now at this point—the pacifism of Zoroaster being forgotten—to try to establish and expand the faith.

The fire became a very important element of state religion in the Sassanid times. And there were supposed to be three great sacred fires: the fire of the kings and the warriors was one, the fire of the priests was the second, and the fire of the farmers and herdsmen was third. And it is in seeking one of those places that we come down to earth and attach ourselves to an archaeological site, one of the really intriguing ones anywhere in the world. It’s at a place called Takht-i Sulaiman, the “Throne of Solomon.” That is an Islamic name applied

to a hilltop up in the north part of Iran, just south of the Caspian Sea in the province of Azerbaijan.

On this hilltop, on a plain that lies more than a mile above sea level surrounded by even taller mountains—which are volcanic in nature and which contain mines for gold, silver, lead, mercury, amethysts—in a plain surrounded by these mountains was this rise of ground, this hill, with a circular lake on top of the hill. This was called the Throne of Solomon in Islamic times; its older, Zoroastrian name is uncertain. That lake is not fed by ordinary springs but by thermal springs attached to the volcanic stuff underground. The hot water bubbles up and fills a perfectly circular lake. If you fly over it in an airplane, it looks like you are looking down at an eye. It is blue water with sort of smoking, steaming stuff on the surface in cold weather.

Around it was built a circular city, and around the city, a circular wall. Those walls were supposed to be 40 feet thick with three gates. This site was well known as a Mongol stronghold. After Islam had taken over the area, the Mongols came in the 1200s. A grandson of Genghis Khan came and conquered this part of Persia, established a seed of government there, and ruled there and built the great walls and built his own administrative center on top surrounding that sacred circular lake.

All of that was very clear to archaeologists who began to come to this site in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But as they got down through the Mongol, or Mogul, layers, as they have come to be called, at the top into the area below, they realized that there was an older Sassanid city there with a palace in it and a temple of some kind. And then that even below that, there was a village going back to the Achaemenid times, 6<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, or 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C., the time of those great kings who worshiped Ahura-Mazda.

It was with great excitement that the Germans who were working on this dig discovered some *bullae*, some clay tablets with writing on them. *Bullae* often are wrapped around other clay tablets so that they have sort of envelopes of clay and other text and tablets inside. But these *bullae* had on them information that showed that this was the site of one of those three sacred fires. It was, in fact, the fire of the kings and the warriors, the fire that was called Gushnasp, and the excitement of rediscovering the place of one of the three great sacred fires of Zoroastrianism was extreme. They found the place where the fire had been. It was on the north side of the lake. They found the

great hole in the floor where that fire altar had apparently been taken out, they thought by robbers and looters and raiders of a later period. They found the little room where they imagined the ashes being taken and then distributed to pilgrims. They saw the ceremonial way that led up the steep north face of the hill where each Sassanian king would come and walk barefoot up the slope of the hill following the example of Khosrau, the great conqueror who took over that hilltop and made it a central place of worship and made that one of the three great official fires of the Zoroastrian religion of the 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D. and later. All of this was discovered, and at last one of those flames and its home had been revealed.

So our Community of the Spirit in this case is the king of the Sassanian dynasty, who is climbing the hill and staying in that private palace—the palace that's between the mysterious water and the sacred flame—and the pilgrims who come; who come during Sassanian time when it is the official state religion, but who keep on coming after the Islamic conquest, when they are now a minority, and even up until the time of the Mongols, still coming. Those pilgrims, those who have chosen to adhere to this ancient faith, they are the ones we are speaking of who are the Community of this Spirit. And they ultimately left because of persecution, went down to Mumbai in India where they have formed the group known as Parsees or Farsis, people of Persia who still acknowledge Ahura-Mazda and the Zoroastrian faith today.

I have a particular interest in this site because of the geology. It looks to me very much like a site called Mt. Olympus, far to the west of Takht-i Sulaiman, the Throne of Solomon, over in Turkey, a place where fire spouted out of the mountainside naturally and where there was a great flow of travertine or calcite from yes, thermal springs. I believe the link between the flames and the travertine flows from the thermal springs at this site in Turkey is repeated at Takht-i Sulaiman, and that that hole in the ground where the German archaeologist imagined an altar had once been is in fact the very place where from the sacred earth itself, one of the three great fires of the Zoroastrian faith, emerged—not fed by ordinary fuel gathered by humans, but created in a very ancient and primeval way that carries us back to some of our earliest thoughts in this course about the earth itself being the source of religion. Here we find its mysterious gases and waters feeding the flame of one of those ancient revealed religions.



## Lecture Thirty-Two

### Writing the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran

#### Scope:

In the beginning, religions were an aspect of a people's overall identity, along with their laws, social system, and territorial boundaries. Later, religions were matters of choice and conversion. They allowed individuals to identify themselves with a group that either transcended or resisted traditional political and social identities. A prime example is the Jewish sect that created the Dead Sea Scrolls, that unique library of parchment scrolls discovered in Palestinian caves shortly after the end of World War II. Converts to this sect retreated to a desert commune now called Qumran to lead a life entirely ordered by the rules of their teachers. In addition to a scriptorium, where scrolls were copied, archaeologists have unearthed a unique set of mikvah'ot, or ritual baths, as well as a cemetery. Possibly identical with the Essenes, the Qumran community opposed not only the Roman and Idumaeans rulers of Judea but also the official Jewish temple hierarchy in Jerusalem.

#### Outline

- I. The people of Qumran withdrew from the mainstream to maintain their faith.
  - A. The Romans and Greeks had laid siege to the Citadel of Jerusalem, and the result was divisions among the Jews about how to interact with this new dominant culture.
  - B. The Sadducees wanted to accommodate this new way and yet maintained the forms and the presence of the Jewish tradition at the temple in Jerusalem.
  - C. The Pharisees, on the other hand, wanted the Jewish people to return to their roots and community-centered worship.
  - D. A third group, the Essenes, left the mainstream altogether.
- II. In 1949, scholars came to the area northwest of the Dead Sea, where two years earlier a Bedouin boy had found a cave containing jars full of ancient scrolls.
  - A. Hundreds of scrolls in thousands of fragments were collected and became the subject of intense study for half a century.
  - B. The texts were sorted, transcribed, and either identified with known writings or determined to be previously unknown texts that tied in with the Essenes.
    1. The Essenes were a breakaway group of reform-minded Jews (predominantly men).
    2. Some of them had decided to retreat from the world into the Judean desert near the Dead Sea.
    3. From their retreat, they kept up a movement that rejected Greek and Roman culture and maintained a connection to Essene communities all over Judea.
  - C. Inside one of the caves were some ruins that proved to have been a community abandoned around 68 A.D.
- III. Roland de Vaux determined that the settlement was no more than 200 years old when it was abandoned.
  - A. He came to believe this was the Essene center the Greeks and Romans had written about.
    1. The site seemed to be the communal dwelling of several dozen people, with large rooms for communal meals and many ritual baths.
    2. There was a place for pottery making and a scriptorium.
    3. There was a cemetery of predominantly adult male bodies and no children.
  - B. He also believed the Dead Sea Scrolls were made by the people of this community.
    1. The scrolls must have been taken to the caves just before the start of the Jewish Revolt.
    2. The community left some of their library down in the caves hoping to someday reclaim them.
- IV. Let us look at the scrolls and their contents to see how well they fit with the community at Qumran.
  - A. There were hundreds of scrolls, and many of them were familiar books from the Torah.
  - B. There were several groups of scrolls that included the complete Hebrew Bible, except for the book of Esther. In some cases, these are the oldest versions that we have of those biblical texts.

- C. There was also another set of books that read like biblical texts but were completely different: the Essenes' eschatological texts.
- D. An even more valuable and interesting find was the rules of the community.
  - 1. The Essenes were a big movement, but we know that only a few of them gathered at Qumran.
  - 2. There they created a sort of spiritual power center for Essenes all over Judea.
- E. The rules seemed to conform to what we see at Qumran in terms of the simplicity of the life and the quest for purity.
- F. Jodi Magness showed that the Qumran pottery was all made there and confirmed the link to the jars that held the scrolls.
- V. We end with a more recent discovery of a potsherd, or ostrakon, from the site of Qumran.
  - A. On it is part of a contract in which a man promises his house, olive tree, and fig orchard to the community.
  - B. He uses the word "Yahad," which means "those who live together." In the scrolls related to the community, "Yahad" appeared repeatedly as the community's name.

### Suggested Reading:

Magness, *The Archaeology of Qumran and the Dead Sea Scrolls*.

### Questions to Consider:

- 1. Which aspects of the sect who wrote or assembled the Dead Sea Scrolls seem to anticipate the later religions of Christianity and Islam?
- 2. Why should the sect have established a base in such an inhospitable desert?

## Lecture Thirty-Two—Transcript

### Writing the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran

Welcome back. In our last lecture, we visited an archaeological discovery that made few headlines and that not many people in the world who took much notice, or even understood. It was that site, the top of that hill called Takht-i Sulaiman, where a great circular lake stands and where, there in northern Iran, generations of Zoroastrians trekked as pilgrims, including kings, to walk barefoot up that northern slope and paid homage or prayed in the presence of one of the three sacred fires of the Zoroastrian faith. But there is a link between the experience of those pilgrims and that of the people who lived in the site that we are going to talk about today—Qumran, by the Dead Sea. Although Qumran is one of the most startling and attention-grabbing discoveries in the entire history of archaeology (it being the site of the Dead Sea Scrolls), it does have a common link with that very obscure and little-known site in northern Iran. The people who were there were natives to the lands who had seen their realm taken over by conquerors and their own way of life under siege from new cultures and new faiths, people who had withdrawn in some ways from the mainstream in order to maintain their faith. That happened in the latter years of the Sacred Fire of Gushnasp, up there on Takht-i Sulaiman, where pilgrims who were holding to the Zoroastrian religion kept going up as a mark of their adherence to the true faith for generations after first Islamic overlords, and then finally even Mongol conquerors, had taken over the site.

At Qumran, the overlords were Romans, and the presence of the Romans in the area caused a great schism to happen among the Jewish peoples who had for so long lived in that stretch between the Jordan, and the Dead Sea, and the Sea of Galilee, and the Mediterranean, that traditional homeland of the Jewish people. The Romans with their very Hellenized culture, and indeed the Greeks who preceded them who had come into the area after the conquest of Alexander the Great with their Hellenistic culture, had unthinkingly, I believe, laid siege to the citadel of Jewish tradition. And the result of that was a lot of divisions among the Jews themselves about how to interact with this new mainstream culture that was swamping not only their little realm, but all the lands in the eastern Mediterranean.

The people who seemed to have wanted to accommodate this new way and yet maintained the forms and the very visible presence of



the old Jewish tradition were called the Sadducees. And they maintained their temple cult and rituals there at the temple in Jerusalem, the site which they said had been the site of King Solomon's temple that held the original Ark of the Covenant with the Ten Commandments that had been handed down to Moses on Mt. Sinai, safe inside that Ark that was inside the temple. That temple had been destroyed, but rebuilt thanks to the Persians and their help and was still maintained. And then Herod himself, a King over Judaea—not a Jew by background, but he certainly embraced that faith—he created a fantastic place of worship there in Jerusalem.

And that was the center or this core of Jewish tradition that had decided to make the temple, its rituals, its sacrificial life, its psalms, its prayers, and its observances the center of their Judaism. And they were the great temple authorities who would often communicate with the king of Judaea, or with the Romans, or with Greek overlords around, and try to get along, try to make things work in this new political world. Sort of tied in with them were some Jewish communities in far-off places, in Alexandria and Egypt, where Jewish experts in the text had been sent down to make a translation of those books of the Hebrew Bible into Greek so that Greeks could read them, but so could all of the Jews being born who now spoke Greek rather than Aramaic or Hebrew as their native tongue. And even way up the Nile in garrisons in Egypt, there were Jewish mercenary troops who would write to the temple and ask for permission to create their own places of worship down in Egypt.

So, the temple there in Jerusalem was still very much the visible center of Jewish faith and tradition, but there were two breakaway groups, according to the Greek and Roman writers, who described the situation in Judaea there in the 1<sup>st</sup> century before our era and the 1<sup>st</sup> century of our era, those last days of independence for the Judean Kingdom. These writers said that these three groups were the Sadducees, whom I just described, the people centered around the priesthood of the temple. And then there was a group called the Pharisees, who were scattered more through the land, and they are sort of the ancestors of modern Judaism. To Christians, they do not appear in a good light in the Gospels, because Jesus often fulminates against these Pharisees. But what they are trying to do is not that different from what Jesus was trying to do, which was to break away from the grip that the priesthood, the Sadducees, had upon Jewish worship, and get it back to its roots, and back to community, and create synagogues

(that is the Greek word for people coming together), where the Pharisees and the rabbis, the teachers who were part of that Pharisaic movement, could localize Judaism and spread it out into regions like Galilee, a long way from Jerusalem both culturally, mentally, and spiritually, as well as in terms of a long walk.

So, we have got Sadducees, and we have Pharisees, but we have another group. They are called Essenes, and it is that group that we are going to be talking about today as we focus on this extraordinary site of Qumran. In 1947, some Bedouin boys who were looking after goats and sheep in some steep hills around the northwest part of the Dead Sea, letting the animals wander through the countryside in search of the very scanty vegetation, lost an animal in one of the many caves that looked out from the cliffs onto the Red Sea. And in throwing stones into the cave mouths in fairly inaccessible spots, one of them later said that he heard something smash—something that just did not sound like rock on rock. So, he scrambled up and dropped into the cave mouth, which was like a window high up in a wall. He slid down in and found himself in a cave filled with tall cylindrical jars that were about two feet high, narrow, and described them as having lids on them, like bowls overturned. And he went along, and some of them were empty, but one of them had three scrolls inside, scrolls that were parchment—that is, treated calf skin, which tends to be more enduring than papyrus—and rolled up and well preserved in a linen sort of bag or envelope.

Well, he took that home, and in the subsequent months—in fact, over the next two years—those caves were explored. Lots of scrolls were discovered around this area, and some of them showed up on the illegal antiquities market, the black market on which so many archaeological treasures have been presented and then lost to sight. Archaeologists took note, and then in 1949, a mission set out for this area, the northwest corner of the Dead Sea. And they identified many caves. They found some that had already been stripped of their contents, but nonetheless, hundreds of scrolls in thousands of fragments were found, including some spectacular, almost-complete ones, and they were collected and made the subject of intense study then for half a century.

Their texts were sorted out, and transcribed, and identified with known writings or discovered to be brand new texts that no one had ever dreamed of. They tie in with the Essenes, because the Essenes

were described as a breakaway group of Jews who were reformers, who believed that the temple priesthood, the Sadducees, had gone the wrong way, and who also did not agree with the principles and the tenants of belief of those rabbis in the Pharisaic movement that was in the towns and the synagogue. They had decided to retreat from the world—or at least some of them—into a desert spot in the Judean desert near the Dead Sea. From a community there, they would keep up a movement that would reject this corrupting mass culture of the Greeks and the Romans, this awful live-for-the-moment hedonism that denied so many of the central Jewish beliefs about ritual purity and one's relationship to the one God. They rejected it all from there, and from the center, they maintained, in fact, a connection to Essene communities all over Judaea.

Well, that certainly seemed to match the Dead Sea setting, especially when it was discovered that within sight of one of the caves, there were some archaeological ruins. And when those ruins were excavated, they proved to have been a community—it's a little reminiscent of our Great Houses in Chaco Canyon, a massive multiple structure about 100 meters long and 50 meters wide with many, many rooms, some of which were quite large, but all packed together. So, it is not individual homes. It is certainly not a village. It seems certain that it had been abandoned in about the year 68 of our era, at a time when there had been a rebellion by the Jews against their Roman overlords. That was the rebellion that culminated finally in the famous Siege of Masada, a place where Jewish zealots held out for years against Roman legions trying to take their stronghold up on that rock of Masada. In that same great Jewish revolt, which began, as I said, in the year 68 of our era, this site, known by its modern Arabic name of Qumran—we do not know what the ancient name was—was abandoned.

So, the archaeologists dug. The dig was led by a Dominican friar. He was French. His name was Roland de Vaux, and he got down and found that it was not an ancient site. This was no tell in the ancient sense of its own history as a community. It only went back about 200 years at most from the time it was abandoned there in the year 68. And there had been a 30-year hiatus from a time when there had been a great earthquake, and yet the people had come back, repaired the building, and carried on the traditional life there. De Vaux very quickly came to believe this was the Essene center that had been written about by the writers, Pliny and some of the other Greek and

Roman writers had described the Essenes withdrawing to the wilderness. Here seemed to be the place. It seemed to be the communal dwelling of several dozen people, probably men. There were no signs of children or families living there. There were large communal rooms which seemed to be set up as refectories for communal meals. There was a room found with stacks of bowls for a large number of people to take their meal together. It was the kind of thing you would find, for instance, in either a military barracks or a monastery.

And there was a place for pottery making, and there were lots and lots of the ritual baths, which in the singular are called mikvah and in the plural mikvah'ot. These are the ritual baths of the Jewish tradition so important for the purification rites. The water must meet certain standards. The baths themselves and their measurements must meet certain standards. And these ten or so baths inside the Qumran complex exactly match that. Well, this seemed very clear to de Vaux, and he published immediately his conclusion. The Dead Sea Scrolls were made by the people who lived in this community at Qumran. The Dead Sea Scrolls must have been carried out to those caves just before the Romans came during the start of the Jewish revolt, and the people had to flee. But they could not carry all of these scrolls and jars, and so on, with them, so they left some of their library down in the caves hoping surely that they would someday be able to come back and reclaim them, but that never happened. Almost two millennia passed before those shepherd boys happened upon the caves, and the secret of the Dead Sea Scrolls was revealed.

So, de Vaux believed the Dead Sea Scrolls are the library of this lost sect of Jews, these people who tried to purify and renew Judaism about which a fair amount had been written but who were not very well known in anything like their own voice, from their own point of view. And some people had associated Jesus as a person who grew up in Galilee, not far from the Dead Sea, as someone who might have been involved in the Essene movement. It was a movement specializing on men, although there do seem to be text that show that women could be involved. De Vaux found a cemetery, one section of which, the western part, seemed to be associated with the Qumran ancient community rather than with later peoples, and it was predominantly adult males. There were no children.

So, it all seemed to tie together. Plus, there was one room inside this complex that seemed to be a scriptorium. It reminded de Vaux of the scriptoria he had seen in France in the old Cistercian monasteries and so on, where the monks would gather and spend their days transcribing, writing, and illustrating ancient texts, and being the source of those texts, which were then sent to palaces, courts, cities, and other monasteries all over the Christian world from those scriptoria, those places of writing within the holy community itself.

So, this is our Community of the Spirits for this lecture. These dwellers at Qumran, who de Vaux believed (and who I certainly believe) to be our lost Essenes, these reformers of the Jewish movement who did not survive the horrors of that suppression of the Jewish rebellion and the attempt to free themselves from the Romans. The conclusion, which seemed so obvious, was not so clear to others. And there were proposals that the site was actually a Roman villa, or a manufacturing center, or some sort of a military outpost. There was certainly a defensive tower at one corner. Many other ideas were put forward, and even the idea that the site of Qumran was closely connected with the scrolls from the caves was attacked. Before one gets exasperated with people not accepting what seems the obvious, I think it is always good to remember a saying of Herodotus in his histories of the Persian wars. It is important that all views be expressed. For if we do not hear many opinions, how can the best be chosen in the same way that if we are trying to tell true gold from other metals, many samples must be examined.

So, we have a lot of different opinions about Qumran. Let us now look at the scrolls and what is in them and try to see how well that would fit with the community there. And then we are going to look at the work of an archaeologist who specializes in an area that we have not talked about very much. She is a ceramics specialist, an American archaeologist whose name is Jodi Magness, and I believe she has finally found the clues that make it possible to say with great conviction that yes, Qumran is the site of the production of the Dead Sea Scrolls. It is the site of an Essene community, and we are going to end with a discovery that shows that (and this was long after de Vaux's dig) there was indeed an idea of a community there, people living together, and that everything about that does match the Essene movement.

The scrolls, now, as I said, there were hundreds. And many of them were familiar books from the Hebrew Bible, the Torah—the five books of Moses, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Numbers—those five books that made up the Holy Book, not just of the Jews, but of the other branches of the faith. And when I talked about Sadducees, and the Pharisees, and the Essenes as the three branches of Judaism, I was not even getting into that other schism that had happened earlier, where the folk called (in the Bible) the Samaritans, who broke away from the temple cult centered at Jerusalem because they felt the temple itself was a concession to pagan Near Eastern ideas of how you worship gods, the book of gods. The book of Exodus had made it clear that the Ark of the Covenant should remain in a tabernacle, a tent, and move around. It should not be housed in a traditional Near Eastern temple to these so-called Samaritans. The temple itself was as great an abomination as all those little shrines that King Solomon was supposed to have built—one for each wife, according to that wife's ancestral religion in the place where she came from.

So, after the death of Solomon, the Jewish realm, which had been joined under King David and King Solomon, is traditionally held to a split in two southern tribes, Benjamin and Judah, and clung to the temple, and the rituals, and the beliefs that went with the temple at Jerusalem. And that became the forerunner of all modern Judaism. And then the Samaritans went their own way, and they did their worship not in a temple, but up on a sacred mountain—a mountain called Gerizim that was in their own territory. The Samaritans are familiar from the parable of the Good Samaritan in the Bible. And that is something that takes place near the Dead Sea. The Samaritan is going along a road that passes from Jericho to Jerusalem and sees the beaten Jew in the road and helps him out. They were completely cut off and alienated from the mainstream of Jewish tradition centered around the temple.

But we know they were very important to an archaeological discovery that has been made on the island of Delos in the middle of the Aegean, a Greek island sacred to Apollo, a great trading center. It was known that there were many cults represented on the island because merchants came from all over and were encouraged to bring their gods with them. So, there were cults to Isis. There were cults to Venetian deities like Baal. And then a synagogue appeared in archaeological excavations during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This was not too

extraordinary. There had been lots of synagogues found around the Mediterranean because Jews were voyagers, and merchants, and financial traders. And that synagogue on Delos turned out to be the synagogue of the Israelites who worshiped God on Mount Gerizim so we actually have four branches of what might be thought of mistakenly as a monolithic Jewish faith coming down through time—four different competing groups, all believing that they’ve got the right answer.

Now, in the scrolls, it becomes clear what the answer was for these Essenes, these people who created the scrolls. There were several groups of scrolls. One of them was books from the Bible (that is where we started a moment ago), the Torah, and then those later books, which are the chronicles of the kings (following the Torah, which is the law, the five books of Moses). [Again] we have got the chronicles of kings. We have the Psalms of David (those great songs of praise, which echo the sounds of praise songs from other religions that are known to us through ancient tablets and inscriptions). And then [there are] some sort of personal, prophetic narratives by people like Isaiah, Micah, and Amos. These were all represented in the Dead Sea Scrolls: The complete Hebrew Bible—or, as the Christians would say, the Old Testament—every book was there except one: Esther. Esther is the story of a Hebrew woman, a Jewish woman, at the court of a Persian king who is probably Xerxes, who becomes one of the king’s wives, and who is a champion for her people against these Persians. For whatever reason, Esther is not there, but one of the books is almost complete. In fact, there was a 22-foot long scroll of one of the books of Isaiah that was virtually intact. And these were so important because at the time that they were discovered, and in some cases still right up to the present, these are the oldest versions that we have on original documents of those biblical texts.

So, very important—but that was only the beginning. There were also another set of books that read like biblical texts but were completely different. They included visions, scenes, predictions, and worldviews that were not at all represented in the Hebrew Bible, the Jewish sacred writings. These were the new texts specific to the community that lived at Qumran and left these scrolls in the caves. These are what are called eschatological. That is, they are things that try to study and consider ideas about the end of the world. And just as the Christian Bible ends with the revelations of Saint John, in

which the end of the world is foreseen, so did these texts that we are going to call Essene texts. They were visions of battles, and calamities, and great divine figures there in the context of the world being ended, and then it is going to be remade. There will be something beyond, and those who lead the pure life and follow the right way will be part of that new world and will survive the calamities and the catastrophes.

So, there were these eschatological writings specific to the group. But to my mind, even more valuable and more interesting was the rule of the monastery. A monastery is the ultimate in a Community of Spirits. A monastery is a group of people who feel so intensely the religious call that they abandon their mainstream cultures, they withdraw from their families and their communities, and they form together a new community based on religious teaching and the idea that every part of your life can now conform to religious ideas. To have that happen, you need to have a very clear-cut set of rules about what those behaviors will be, what those rituals will be, what will be the nature of the life in your enclosed world that will be different from, and a model to, the world outside.

The Essenes were a big movement. We know that only a few of them gathered at Qumran. Or if by some miracle that is not the Essene site near the Dead Sea in the Judean desert, wherever it was, it was only a small group. But there they created a sort of spiritual power center where Essenes who were forced by necessity, or compulsion, or just habit to go on living in their communities, those sort of Hellenized, Jewish, Roman-dominated communities around the shores of the eastern Mediterranean, they could know that they were receiving from this place, and by contributing to the life of the people who lived there, contributing to the creation of a new world, the coming of a more purified existence by their support for this little community.

So, the rules for them, just like the rules for the later Christian monastic orders in Europe, were present on these scrolls. Well, this is a very exciting set of materials. And the rules seem to conform to what was seen at Qumran in terms of the simplicity of the life and the quest for purity. You may be familiar that some of the books in the Torah explain in great detail matters of purity, about keeping one’s body pure, about using pure things, about shunning impure foods, and so on. The word “kosher” is partly tied in with that concept of pure food. But one of the things that was very clearly laid

out in these writings was purity of vessels, that the things that held food and drink needed to be pure themselves, and needed to be handled in a very pure way, and needed to be safeguarded against impure things like a lizard getting inside.

So strong was the idea about purity expressed in these texts that it was clear that if you took a vessel with pure liquid and poured it into an impure vessel, the impurity was capable of coming back up the flow of liquid and contaminating that entire vessel and everything in it requiring it to be discarded. How are you going to make your own self certain that your vessels are pure? You fabricate the pottery yourself. And that explains, it would seem, the presence of a pottery kiln there at Qumran. They could get the clay locally. The water was from a wadi, one of those little seasonal channels of water that come down through the hills. The people of Qumran created a dam at the bottom to create a reservoir, and that reservoir water was then conducted by aqueducts to the community. And that water was used not just for the drinking and for the mikvah'ot, the sacred baths, but also for the pottery industry there. And the Qumran pottery, which includes those very cylindrical jars that were seen containing the first of the Dead Sea Scrolls to be found, those tall cylinders were all made there and not typical of pottery from other places. So, the role of Jodi Magness was to go through and show that the pottery in the caves could only come from Qumran, that there was an intimate link between that archaeological site and the caves where the scrolls were found, and that we did indeed have the library of this otherwise unknown group (at least unknown through their own words), the Essenes.

I would like to end with a more recent discovery of a potsherd, a fragment of ceramic, an ostrakon from the site of Qumran on which is written part of a contract in which a man promises that he is going to contribute his house, and his olive tree, and his fig orchard to the community. This is something you may be aware that is very common in monastic life, that you give up what you have to the order as you join. And the word that he uses for the community is Yahad, for "those who live together." And when the people who had found the inscription went back and looked through the Dead Sea Scrolls that related to the community, the rule, the records of the community, that word "Yahad" appeared again and again as the title of the people who lived there. Well, Essene had always been assumed to be their own name for themselves, but why should that be? Quakers did not call themselves Quakers. I'm well aware of this

from my Quaker ancestors at Richmond, Indiana. To themselves, they were friends. "Quaker" was an outsiders term even of abuse for that religious community. So, it appears that we now know what these people called themselves—Yahad—and through this work by ceramic experts like Jodi Magness, through de Vaux's initial careful excavation, and through a number of chance finds, we have been able to bring back to the light of day one of the most extraordinary "communities of the spirit" in all of human history.

## Lecture Thirty-Three

## Taking Religions Underground at Rome

## Scope:

The oppressive central government of the Roman Empire, coupled with the multicultural traditions of its subjects, fostered a new crop of religious cults that challenged the official state religion and worship of the emperors. In and below the streets of Rome, archaeologists have uncovered evidence for widespread worship of the Egyptian gods Serapis and Isis, as well as the Persian god Mithras and demonic forces controlled through the supposed arts of the Zoroastrian magi. The catacombs of ancient Rome also show early stages in the rise of Christianity, a religion forced underground by imperial edict. The iconography of early Christian tombs reveal a community that expressed its faith through images of lighthouses and anchors and celebrated its creed of agape (Greek for "an open welcome to all") through egalitarian feasts. The veneration of the honored dead, so important to early religions, was adopted by early Christians to commemorate the graves of martyrs, thus creating cults within the larger religion.

## Outline

- I. We look at Rome both above and below ground to see what kinds of religious movements were fostered by the empire.
  - A. Rome was a gigantic economic engine for moving commodities and precious goods, and it became a melting pot of people from many parts of the world.
  - B. There was no religious bigotry; it was assumed people would follow the traditional religion of their region.
- II. Above ground in Rome was the official Roman religion; below ground were movements that show a seething mass of ideas about new faiths in a process of syncretism.
  - A. The Romans inherited Greek-style temples but modified them to Roman taste.
  - B. Romans would not tolerate people who refused to join in the state cult of emperor worship, which was rather chilly, uninvolved, and depersonalized.

- C. The new religions that were springing up everywhere were offering a sense of involvement and salvation after life.
  - D. Personal involvement can often take people into the world of the occult.
- III. If we go a little deeper, we come to places of water in the Roman underground.
  - A. Nymphs, spirits of pure flowing water, were worshiped at underground springs, where Romans constructed shrines called nymphaea.
  - B. The very ancient mother goddess of Asia, Cybele, was also honored with a grotto and an artificial cave down by the side of the Tiber River.
- IV. If we go deeper still, we find between 60 and 100 miles of tunnels, called the catacombs, under the city of Rome.
  - A. The catacombs served two purposes: It was a quarry for building the city and storage space for Rome's citizens.
  - B. Many members of the traditional Roman faith used the tunnels as burial plots.
  - C. Some Roman pagan traditions were picked up by Christians, who also interred their dead in the catacombs.
- V. Two great religions that grew beneath Rome were Christianity and Mithraism.
  - A. One of the old Indo-European gods that Zoroaster rejected, Mithras, took over from Ahura-Mazda and was worshiped in underground chapels or caves called Mithraeums.
  - B. Mithraeums hosted ceremonies of extraordinary intensity.
    1. There were seven grades of initiation, ordeals you had to pass on your way to becoming a soldier for Mithras.
    2. There was also an elaborate, bloody baptism.
  - C. Although it seemed that Mithraism was going to be the next great religion, Christianity prevailed.
    1. Christianity was persecuted at times because Christians would not acknowledge the Roman emperor as a god.
    2. Christian martyrs were interred in the catacombs.

- D. Like the Romans, Christians were convinced that the souls of their dead needed sustenance.
  - 1. There was a sacred meal, the *refrigerium*, that allowed people to join their dead loved ones in this supper.
  - 2. The supper was celebrated again on the anniversary of the person's death.
- E. One set of catacombs was found directly under St. Peter's Basilica.
  - 1. Christian tradition said Saints Peter and Paul died on the same date.
  - 2. Their feasts were celebrated on the same day, and in inscriptions found in the catacombs, both were described as mediators between the living and Jesus Christ.
  - 3. The graffiti and inscriptions on the tombs of those early Christians are the oldest Christian texts.

#### Suggested Reading:

Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras*.

Portella, *Subterranean Rome*.

#### Questions to Consider:

- 1. Rome was a multicultural city of many faiths. Was such an environment hostile or conducive to the development of new religious movements?
- 2. How do you account for the ultimate failure of the Mithraic religion?

## Lecture Thirty-Three—Transcript

### Taking Religions Underground at Rome

Welcome back. In our last lecture, we visited Qumran, the center for the Essenes out in the wilderness, a Jewish sect that was trying to reform and purify the Jewish tradition and carry it forward into a new age free of Greek cultural domination and Roman political domination. That dream was shattered by the Roman repression of the Great Jewish Revolt starting in the year 68. It is the subsequent story that I'd like to follow in this lecture, where the Roman Empire turns out to be a place where, in truth, some religions are repressed, some reformed movements go under, but where, because of the nature of Roman life and of the Roman Empire itself, many new ones were formed, and many gravitated to the center of the Roman world, the city of Rome itself, in the center of Italy on the Tiber River, and created places of worship there and out of the group of conflicting cults, ancient religions, new sects, which were all drawn to Rome and all found adherence among the million-strong population of what was the largest city in the world at that time, come at least one of the really important religions of our own time, Christianity. That's the story we're going to follow today. We're going to be going to Rome. We are going to look at Rome both above ground and below as we see what kind of sects, what kind of religious movements, were fostered by the empire.

We need to put this story a little bit in its setting, which is economic, as I indicated last time, talking about those voyaging Jewish merchants who were carrying their faith with them as they traveled out of their homeland in Judea along the seaways and roads of the Roman Empire. Rome was, among other things, a gigantic economic engine for moving commodities and precious goods by sea and by land over a vast area. We talked about the Persian Empire reaching from the banks of the Indus River all the way to the Balkans. The Romans controlled an area that reached from Mesopotamia to Scotland and from North Africa all the way up to the Rhine.

Within that area, thanks to the foresight of the Emperor Augustus, were roads, were sea routes, and were provinces that needed to exchange goods in order to maintain the high level of material (what we would call standard of living) that Romans expected. So, the result was the fostering of trade, the fostering of movements of people, and Rome itself became a melting pot of many people from

many parts of the world drawn together in Rome often for economic purposes. If you want to see some remarkable testimony to this, go to the port of Rome, the ancient abandoned city of Ostia at the mouth of the Tiber River.

For every 100 people who go to Pompeii, one goes to Ostia, but it's just as rewarding, and you will see the mosaics of the different merchants whose ships were going to all parts of the Mediterranean and bringing back everything from palm trees and incense to elephants for the shows in the Coliseum—all of these things represented on the mosaics. Along with these goods and the merchants who carried them were the religions from the different parts of the world. The precedent for Rome and its tolerant welcome of different religions was the old port city of Athens in Greece, the Piraeus. Let's think back to our lecture on the Acropolis and its many cults. Yes, there were multiple cults on the Acropolis in Athens, but they all derived from that ancient Greek tradition.

A very different situation prevailed down at the Piraeus, the port of Athens. Four miles away by the sea, there traders from different parts of the world were welcomed along with their gods so that we would have temples set up to the deities of the Phoenicians who were there setting up their own little trading communities and bringing their gods and their shrines with them. In one of Plato's dialogues, there's a new religion that's just been established at the Piraeus. Thracian merchants from Thrace in the far north have come down to the Piraeus, established a little colony, and they are instituting for the first time rights and ceremonies in honor of their version of the goddess Artemis, whom they called Bendis, and it consists of relay races on horseback with lighted torches passed from hand to hand—very exciting to watch. The Athenians trooped down to see this show of this alien religion.

So, at that time, there was no religious bigotry, no sense of persecuting a person for what was inside their head. It was assumed that each person would follow the traditional religion of their region, of their family, of their clan, and their tribal background. Rome promoted the same kind of situation. We know that among the religions that were appealing to Romans were such cults as that of Isis from Egypt, someone closely connected to our Egyptian pharaohs and that world that we've looked at in a couple of lectures, Near Eastern deities, and in particular for our cause right now, Jews

who had come to Rome found a tolerant welcome there, and even as important a person as Poppaea, the wife of Nero, took an interest in this very novel (to her) Jewish faith. We know that so tolerant was Rome and so large was the Jewish population that there were a couple of dozen synagogues in the city.

What you would have seen above ground in Rome was the official Roman religion inherited from the past great temples in the Greek style, modified slightly by Roman taste, to the gods like Jupiter, Juno, Minerva, the Capitoline trinity, those three ancient Roman gods who dominated from their joint temple on the Capitoline Hill, but many other gods—Mars, Fortuna, Janos, a host of gods, Venus, Ceres, we could go on and on. Hestia, to the Greeks, was represented by the hearth goddess Vesta in the Roman world, and there was a college of vestal virgins. They were the ones who gave Hiram Bingham the idea of calling the college of chosen women in the Inca Empire Virgins of the Sun. But they seemed to have performed, these two groups of women, the same function: dedicating their lives to the service of the state religion.

All that was above ground. All that was very visible, but below ground were movements that show a sort of seething mass of ideas about new faiths. Remember, once you step into the world of revealed religions, you're dealing with a cerebral take on spiritual life, books written down with facts, and traditions, and rules, and views of the universe, which sort of cross over very much into the territory of the philosophical schools, into speculation. Just as the philosophical schools of the Greek, the Hellenistic world, had generated lots of rivalries, and alternative visions, and splinter groups, so did religions, once this world of mixing began, where people began to really get a good look from living side-by-side with others.

At these different religions, a process called syncretism took place. Syncretism means the blending, the drawing together, the combining of elements from different religions into a new form, a joint kind of hybrid of several ancient religious traditions. It was happening at Rome. It was happening around the Roman world with this mixing of peoples and with this general tolerance of different faiths.

There was one thing the Romans would not tolerate, and that was people who refused to join in the state cult of emperor worship. The first emperor, born Octavian, ultimately known as Augustus, was reluctant to go down this path, but he did authorize the idea of



worshipping the Caesars, at least out in the provinces where those non-Romans, those Egyptians, and Greeks, and Near Easterners had been accustomed to worship humans as if they were gods. But later, that tradition spread through Rome itself and became part of the laws of the Roman Empire that reverence must be paid to the deified emperors themselves. So, that becomes part of the state cult, but in general, by this time—we're talking about 2,000 years ago in Rome, the height of the Roman Empire—the state religions had become rather chilly, uninvolved, depersonalized cults. Remember our discussion of what a classical temple was like. The home for a god who was served by priests and priestesses who went in and out of the god's house, but you, the ordinary worshiper, did not. You were outside by that open-air altar, waiting with your fee in hand to make an offering, or the animal sacrifice that you've brought, anything from a dove to an ox, that you will leave to have placed upon the altar, sacrificed in your name. And then you'll be assured by the priest or priestess that the god has heard your prayer and will attend to your needs. How satisfying is that? Not very.

What the new religions that were springing up everywhere were offering to people was a sense of, first of all, involvement, personal involvement with these mysteries of faith during life. Second, they offered salvation after life. Personal involvement can often take people into the world of the occult. One of the first things that we will find in Rome, as we get out our troughs and start scraping through what's left of the city, is that just under the surface, we're going to find little reminders of the occult, the magical side of Roman religion sorcery. We're going to find curse tablets. There was a belief that you could harness spirits from all sorts of different religions—evil, malignant, powerful, unseen forces—and if you wrote them by name on a little tablet of (typically) lead, scratch in their names, scratch in the name of the person that you want to curse, describe what it is you want done. The most common thing was saying bind them, meaning tie them up, immobilize them, prevent them from helping themselves, and then ultimately destroying them. You fold this up, and you place it somewhere where it will take an effect on the person you want to be cursed.

The most extraordinary set of these, to me, are the ones that have been found, these curse tablets, planted, buried under the soil of racetracks. There were lots and lots of people in the Roman world, as in the modern world, for whom part of their religious fervor seemed

to have been directed at sports. Let's say, for the Roman world, at least, sports, games, contests of all kinds, still had that religious aura over them that we saw in the Greek world, certainly at the Olympic games. So, they still paraded the images of the gods before, for instance, the chariot races at Circus Maximus. Well, lots of people went. They became addicted. They began to bet, and they were losing money, so they would try to put curses on the chariots of those competitors who were running against their own favorites. They would bury these curse tablets, sometimes even naming the horses on the chariot team that they wanted to destroy, saying bind them and listing all of these strange, outlandish, non-Roman deities and demons on these tablets, and leave them there for the archaeologists to uncover 2,000 years later.

If we go a little deeper, we come to places of water in the Roman underground. Nymphs, those spirits of pure flowing water, were worshiped. There was getting to be less and less pure flowing water in Rome as the population grew and sanitation didn't keep pace. Nonetheless, where there were springs of free flowing water, the Romans would create underground little places called *nymphaea* (singular *nymphaeum*), where you could go down and make an offering to these pure divinities—kind of, I would think, an antidote to all of the bad feeling, this cloud of malevolence that hung around the curse tablets. A very ancient goddess was also honored with a grotto and an artificial cave down by the side of the Tiber River. This was the mother goddess of Asia, this descendent of the great mother goddess that we've encountered in so many points in our course.

The Romans called her by this name *Cybele* (the way the Romans would have spelled it) that had come to them from Asia, the *Magna Mater*, the Great Mother. She had come into Roman life quite early, although she was very alien to Roman ways, and they didn't approve of the fact that she was served by eunuchs, men who had deliberately castrated themselves in order to be appropriate servants, and priests, and devotees of the Great Goddess. But we have to reflect that in many religious traditions, the idea of celibacy prevails—we're a long way from our joyful Scandinavian farmers out there having sex on their fields publicly, men and women together, to encourage the crop to grow. On the contrary, many of the religions—we will see it especially in the revealed religions—emphasize the spirit, emphasize the denial of the flesh. That's something, as we saw, that Zoroaster

specifically spoke against, but the denial of the flesh would include denial of the sexual impulse.

So these eunuchs brought the Mother Goddess in due to an oracle saying that they would not defeat the Gauls unless they carried the worship of the Mother Goddess to Rome and planted her there in their city. They obediently did so. So, her priests, her eunuchs, came along and brought in that idea of the asexual religious life, where you abstain from sex and many other pleasures of the flesh in order to heighten your spiritual awareness, in order to heighten your suitability to serve the god. On one day a year, the priests of the Mother Goddess on a night would take her emblem, an iconic symbol, which was a meteorite that had fallen from the sky and, along with the other sacred implements, carried them down to this grotto, this artificial cave by the side of the Tiber, washed them in the river, and then carried them back up to the temple for another year, having purified them in this way.

Let's go a little deeper. We're going to find tunnels now, miles and miles of tunnels between 60 and 100 miles of tunnels under the city of Rome. Rome is built on soft volcanic rock. It spreads northward from the area around Lake Nemi and the Alban Hills, and in this soft rock, it was easy to cut tunnels and chambers that served two purposes. One was you got a lot of building material for the city up above very cheap, and second, you got some real estate down below, which could be used for anything from storage cellars to family burial plots. Real estate was at a premium up top, but if you just rented access to a hole in the ground, and got down below, and excavated out a large area, you could have a very large and very inexpensive cemetery for your family. This is what many Romans did of the traditional Roman faith. They were observing there the rights of gods who they called the *mānēs*, and the "DM" that you will so often see on Roman tombstones is *dis manibus*: To the gods of the underworld, those *mānēs*, we commend these spirits of our family.

Roman cemeteries were active places. In the Roman tradition, there was the idea that the dead were going to get hungry, and if they got too hungry, they would come out of their tombs and visit you at your house. Ovid gives a description of a man waking up at night suddenly convinced that one of the family spirits is in the house, realizing he's forgotten the proper rituals, and he gets out of bed, and Ovid says he begins the exorcism by snapping his fingers (third

finger and thumb together is the prescribed method), and then putting beans in his mouth. Having put them in his mouth (that part I don't get), throwing them over his shoulder, he repeats this nine times. Each saying that he is doing this, he is throwing these beans in order that the spirit will leave the house. Then he rings some bells or strikes little metal bells, and with that sound, which worldwide is seemingly associated with the idea of exorcising spirits, he can be assured that the spirit will have collected the sustenance of the beings and return to the underworld.

We're going to see some of this Roman pagan tradition picked up by Christians, who are going to be also interring their dead in the chambers and corridors under Rome, those areas that we call the catacombs, a network of underground tunnels. But first we're going to look at another religion. There are two great religions growing under Rome in the dark. One of them is Christianity. We will come back to that, but the other is a descendent of Zoroastrianism. It is called Mithraism now. One of the devas, one of the old Indo-European gods that Zoroaster rejected, Mithras, has been resurrected by this faith and made this central figure. Ahura-Mazda has been displaced in favor of this clean-shaven, Apollo-like youth with curly hair, a little Phrygian cap, like a stocking cap, to show that he comes from Asia, and he's usually seen with one knee up on a bull's back, grabbing a horn, hauling the bull's head back to expose the throat, and then driving a knife into the bull's throat to sacrifice the bull. The bull is making a reappearance here. Think how often we have seen the bull, from Altamira Cave, with little Maria Sautuola seeing those *bueyes*, or *torros*, on the ceiling, through the great bull at Çatalhöyük, [to] the bull dance at Knossos. Now it appears as what has always been below the surface, that great dark force of nature that represents all that is not human, light, and civilized.

Mithras has taken over from Ahura-Mazda, in this spinoff of Zoroastrianism, the role of the force of light, the protector, the one who is leading the battle against the forces of darkness. Now, in Mithraism, it may be assumed that light is going to win over darkness, but unlike Zoroastrianism, where you have a supreme, majestic god, Mithras seems very human—a young man who needs your help, and the devotees of Mithras, who seemed to have sort of built up their religion to critical mass in the city of Tarsus, which is over in Asia Minor and is coincidentally the hometown of Saul, a Jew, who will take on the name Paul in later life. It means "small

guy,” Paulos. He, of course, will introduce Christianity. So, both of these religions—the Christianity that is spread by people like Paul, the Mithraism come from that same area of Asia Minor via homelands further to the east.

Now, a Mithraeum is one of the underground chapels where Mithras was worshiped. There were many in Rome. We’re sure we have not discovered them all, but they’re found all the way from the north of England over to Arabia. It was such a popular cult, people were recruited in ceremonies that might remind us of the initiation ceremonies of fraternities and sororities to join the club, to join the forces of Mithras against the forces of darkness, because devotees of Mithras were happy to worship the Emperor and to pay obeisance to the state gods of Rome. There was no problem about this cult. In fact, it attracted many legionnaires, and Mithraeums are often found at legionnaire camps so that the soldiers themselves could have easy access to their place of worship, this little underground chapel. It really was underground. It reminds me very much, in one way, of those kivas that we saw at Chaco. You enter through the ceiling of this underground chamber coming down a ladder.

In some cases, when archaeologists first broke into these Mithraeums in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, ancient ladders were still in place, and you were going down the same rungs that devotees of Mithras had been descending centuries earlier. Once you were inside a Mithraeum, you were in a small chapel that was made up to look like a cave. It had a pounded earth floor and around the edges, in the sort of side areas, pebbles to give sure footing. The walls might be, first of all, covered with basketwork, and then stucco or cement was put over the basketwork to get a rough feeling like a cave. Everything was done to give you the sense that you have descended into the earth, something that evokes so many of our earlier religious experiences now being readapted—that idea of the cave, the sacred cave to the needs of Mithras. Why? Because the shining of the light in the darkness of the cave is the emblem of Mithras.

In those little Mithraeums, there were ceremonies of an extraordinary intensity. The central revealing of the image probably of the young god killing the bull must have been a big moment, an epiphany, a showing forth of what lay behind the screen that covered the altar and of all the mysterious astrological and demonic figures that appeared surrounding that central scene of the bull killing. But there were also

things that you had to do and ordeals to which you had to pass on your way to becoming a soldier for Mithras. No longer is this the Zoroastrian ideal of peace, where you serve as a soldier for Ahura-Mazda by leading a pure, honorable, true life. No, you are ready to fight for this god, and you are going to go through seven grades of initiation, starting with a raven, going on through a hidden one, a lion. There was a stage where you were called a Persian, a stage where you are called a soldier in this progression upward. On the top of the list of grades was becoming a father, where you obviously become the sort of head of that individual Mithraeum, the leader of its group.

During their ceremonies (we know from outside commentary), people would wear masks, including the raven and the lion—which really carry us a long way back—wear masks of the grade that they were representing at that time and carry on ceremonies. There were ordeals to pass through. Remember, you didn’t usually have to have baptisms in the old traditional religions, because you were born into it. You would, at most, have an initiation where the final stages were revealed to you. But with the new cults like Christianity, like Mithras, you come from an outer world, where you’ve been brought up one way. Now you’re going to reform yourself, be born again as a new person now enlightened, now having joined the faith, now believing in the right things.

So, there was an elaborate baptism, a very bloody one, and this connects Mithras in a deep, and I think we would say dark, way to all of those blood-drenched cults that we have encountered through the course of our overview. You would stand under a grating; a bull would be slaughtered on the grating above you. You would be baptized in a hot shower of the blood pouring from this freshly slaughtered bull. A bull killing would happen to bring you into the sacred circle. Either before or after that, you would have gone through such ordeals as being blindfolded, stood in front of a ditch, have your hands tied behind you with chicken guts from a freshly slaughtered chicken, and then told to jump blindly over that ditch, trusting those other lodge members that they were telling you exactly how light it was and what lay ahead. Again, the blood carries us into those primeval cults, and it must have brought into this world a lot of the feeling of those ancient rites.

At times, you were apparently witness to a staged murder. So, the sense of stage management was very strong. No one was being

killed, but you thought they were, and your reaction was being tested. There were hymns to Mithras. There were astronomical things and so on. One might have said Mithras is going to be the next great religion because all of the legions are joining, all of these strong, important men, but that would have been wrong. It's Christianity, the other cult growing up underground, that is going to really prevail. Christianity is, of course, a persecuted cult at times—not every year in the reign of every emperor. But like the Jews, the Christians would not acknowledge the emperor or any emperor as a god, and this was unforgivable.

So, at times, when scapegoats needed to be found, as after the great fire of Rome that destroyed much of the city in the reign of Nero, blame was put on the Christians. They were persecuted. They were rounded up, and they were tortured, thrown (yes, truly) to lions in the Coliseum and other great arenas. All of this made for martyrs. What's the word "martyr" mean? A witness, someone who bore witness to the truth. Now we have a religion in which we find willing human sacrifices, because they could have gotten out by saying, "Alright, I'll worship the emperor. I recant. I see the light now." But no, willing human sacrifices are dying for their faith and, in a way, we've seen that before, but now, with the Christians, it is for one of the revealed religions and for their belief in Jesus and his promised salvation.

The result is that they would be taken, these Romans, who were executed in this way, down into the catacombs, and they would be among a much larger majority of Romans who were Christians who had died of natural causes, but they would be interred in one of the vast galleries, or underground chambers, dedicated to the dead. There were niches in the wall. Sometimes there were little tubes so that food or drink could be poured in, and there was feasting with the dead. People were convinced that those Christian souls also were part of a community that was just on the other side, just invisible, hanging around their tombs and needed sustenance. There was a sacred meal, the *refrigerium*, the refreshing meal, that allowed people who were alive to join their dead loved ones in this supper. The supper was celebrated again on the anniversary of the person's death. The date of the death, the day of the month and the year in which they had died, was put on the tombstone so everyone would know when the next feast would be held at the tomb of that person. That's the ancestry of our idea of putting the date of death on a tombstone in modern mainstream American culture.

It's interesting that one of these areas of catacombs, or underground tombs, was found directly under St. Peter's Church. There was one tradition that Saint Peter, the first bishop of Rome and one of Jesus's own disciples, who had emigrated to Rome, was buried on the Appian Way. He and Paul (who we've talked about already, an apostle who came to Rome to stand trial for his Christianity) were supposed to have died on the same day of the calendar. Their feasts were celebrated on the same day, and both of them now, in the inscriptions that we find under the ground in Rome, play the same role. They are mediators between you and Jesus Christ. Most of the funeral texts do not say "Jesus help me." They instead say Peter and Paul. People like those Romans who are buried in their tombs under the soil of Rome itself, someone near and familiar, someone who has suffered as you have suffered, those are now the intermediaries who are prayed to in these first Christian texts, the graffiti and the inscriptions on the tombs of those early Christians under the streets of Rome. It was an extraordinary scene. There's probably never been a time like it for competing religions, for a ferment of religious activity, but out of it has grown a faith that continues to be one of the strongest forces in the world today.

## Lecture Thirty-Four

### Forging Iron at Jenne-jeno on the Niger

#### Scope:

The West African city of Jenne, linked by the Niger River to Timbuktu, is famous for its monumental, multitowered mud brick mosque, dating to the area's conversion to Islam. An older city and an older, indigenous religion were discovered by American archaeologists Roderick and Susan McIntosh after 1975, when they identified a lost nearby city of tells through study of aerial photographs. Years of excavation brought to light Jenne-jeno, or Old Jenne, a vast urban conglomeration of neighborhoods founded in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. Archaeological discoveries combined with local oral traditions indicated that many authority figures in this ancient city were not hereditary chiefs but craftsmen belonging to a guild of ironworkers. Their secret techniques for transforming rocky ore to gleaming weapons and tools seemed to indicate supernatural knowledge. Thus the blacksmiths became priestly leaders of the community at large, as well as a sect with hidden rites of its own.

#### Outline

- I. In this lecture we look at a collision between Islam and the practitioners of indigenous religious faiths in West Africa.
  - A. Islam was founded by, or revealed to, the historical person Mohammad, who lived in Arabia in the late 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D.
  - B. He was brought up among people of many different faiths, including Christianity, Judaism, and indigenous beliefs.
  - C. His revelation was a vision of the right path for humans to follow, but also of all of religious history. He wrote down his revelation as the Koran, the sacred book of Islam.
    1. The Koran included many aspects of the Jewish and Christian faiths.
    2. It also included the sense of being part of a great battle and a regimented sequence of daily prayers from Zoroastrianism.
  - D. Islam spread within Mohammad's own lifetime. Within a generation of his death, different sects of Islam had appeared.

- II. Sufi Islam spread westward across the Sahara and in the 1200s came into the area of Mali.

- A. The North African desert and the Mediterranean coast of Africa were converted to Islam quickly because of the old Roman trading routes.
- B. In equatorial Africa, the king at Jenne converted his kingdom to Islam and built an extraordinary mosque using the adobe architecture of traditional sub-Saharan Africa.
- C. In West Africa, Sufi Islam was successful in a way that some other branches of Islam would not have been because it was more accommodating of local traditions and practices.
- D. Jenne flourished under the Islamic dynasties.
  1. It became a bastion of Islam far away from the centers.
  2. Scholars long attributed technological innovations, such as iron use, to the people who arrived with Islam.
  3. It was believed that most of the marks of a highly developed, civilized city went back to that time.
  4. Jenne's participation in a lively trading system was also assumed to begin with the arrival of Islamic peoples.

- III. Roderick and Susan McIntosh excavated the lost city of Old Jenne, or Jenne-jeno, and shattered the old ideas about when ironworking began in West Africa, when this community became a player in international trade, and when complex urban life began in this part of Africa.

- A. They were studying aerial photographs of a series of 40-foot-high mounds a few kilometers away from Jenne.
- B. They excavated the mounds and, in the bottom 15 feet or so, found the remains of the crops that the first West African farmers had planted as they moved into the region.
- C. They were able to show that, in a short time, the area had become in its own right a great urban center.
- D. They were most interested in the evidence for ironworking and found some workshops.
  1. The ore was smelted in workshops around the periphery of the urban zone.
  2. The pure iron was then brought into the city, ready to be forged.

3. At first, ornaments, tools, and weapons were believed to be the ironworkers' stock in trade.
- IV. An iron workshop high up in the mound, dating to 800 A.D., particularly attracted their attention.
- A. It seemed normal, until they found a stone structure, a sort of platform.
    1. It was made entirely of flat little slabs of sandstone built up in layers.
    2. They found terracotta statuettes of human and animal forms that had been deliberately shattered and the fragments placed within the crevices of this platform.
    3. Bits and pieces of iron and slag were also strategically deposited throughout the platform.
    4. This was a ritual; the workshop was a religious place.
  - B. Many crafts have their own religions and superstitions.
  - C. The blacksmiths were diviners.
    1. They provided oracular services, performed rituals like circumcision, and acted as healers.
    2. This particular platform was a rainmaking platform, so the ironsmiths of Jenne-jeno were also rainmakers.
    3. The platform was where sacrifices were made and rituals were carried out.
  - D. Although there were Marabouts, or monks, among the Sufi Islamic community, the ironworkers lived on because they came from a more indigenous source.
    1. The rituals bound the sacred community of ironworkers together.
    2. The ironworkers made pilgrimages in their youth from forge to forge to learn the skills.
    3. They married into the families of other ironworkers.
    4. They brought forward some of their ancestors' indigenous traditions.

#### Questions to Consider:

1. Do any modern crafts or industries seem to have developed any cult practices analogous to those of blacksmiths in Africa's Niger River communities?
2. What might you deduce about a society that ascribed religious and magical powers to ironworkers?

## Lecture Thirty-Four—Transcript

### Forging Iron at Jenne-jeno on the Niger

Welcome back. Last time, we witnessed the collision of two young religions beneath these streets of Rome—Mithraism and Christianity—a contest from which Christianity emerged triumphant. We're moving now, in this lecture, to another revealed religion, Islam, and another collision, but in this case, it's a collision of a different sort. Islam spread seemingly with the speed of light from its origins in the Arabian Peninsula. It used some of those same roads and trading networks that had long been carrying commerce and ideas in the Roman world, and it ultimately reached west Africa. There in west Africa, we are going to look at a collision between Islam and the practitioners of indigenous religious faiths.

Islam was founded by, or revealed to, the historical person Mohammad, born in 570 of our era. He was born at a time when the Roman Empire, as ruled from Rome, had ceased to be. It had instead been broken into two, sort of, and given his wonderful words in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, "a fabric that crumbled of its own weight"—it has crumbled. It has divided a remnant. Often the West has been divided among barbarian kings, and in the East, still calling itself the Roman Empire but now ruled more and more by Greek-speaking Emperors from the ancient city of Byzantium, rechristened Constantinople, city of Constantine the Emperor, who first legalized Christianity around the year 300 of our era.

Christianity is now a great force in the world, and the official religion of what's left of the Roman Empire. That's the case when Mohammad is born in that year 570. He was born in the best possible place to be influenced by religious ideas, because he was born in a caravan station on the Arabian Peninsula, on its west side, along that line of sea route and highways that connected the area down near Yemen (where the incense comes from, the frankincense, the myrrh) with the territory around Petra (that we saw with our Nabateans), and on to places like Damascus and Gaza, the port on the Mediterranean, where shipments of goods had come all the way across the Indian Ocean from the Indies and from China, could be then transported into what was still a very active consumer market there in the rotting remains of the Roman Empire. So, he's brought up to trade. He's brought up with the people of many different faiths all around him, and I just want to lay out some of the strands of



religious belief that he would have encountered as a young man growing up in this community.

There was Christianity itself, especially what's going to evolve into the Eastern Orthodox brand of Christianity. There is Judaism, because the Jews are still a very strong force in the world, though the Diaspora has now taken place. They were expelled from their homeland by the Emperor Hadrian after a second Jewish revolt. There is also a set of indigenous beliefs there in Arabia itself. We saw the Nabateans and the different gods that they worshiped. We have gods such as that, but we also have an animistic religion that goes way back into the mists of time and consists of endowing certain stones or idols with great powers, great spiritual force. A place where a lot of these images were kept was the city of Mecca, not too far away from where Mohammad lived.

Mohammad had a revelation as a young man, as so many others we've talked about, Zoroaster included, had a revelation. Where was his revelation? In a cave on a mountain near that caravan stop where he grew up. So, we are back in the cave. We are back in that underground place that seems to be the source of so many religious movements and religious experiences. His revelation was to have a vision of the world, and of the right path for humans to follow, and also a vision of sort of all of religious history, presented to him, dictated to him, which he then wrote down. That became the Koran, the sacred book of Islam. It included many aspects of the Jewish and Christian faiths.

Many characters appeared in that book that we're familiar from the Jewish and Christian scriptures, including Moses, Abraham, and Jesus himself, Mary, the mother of Jesus. All were part of the story as written down by Mohammad, but much more was presented. Much more detail about the right way to live one's life in practical, day-to-day terms in the book of the Islamic faith, the Koran than was present in the gospels. The gospels, in fact, contained long arguments by people like Paul and the letters about what was the right way to carry on the rituals and traditions of a proper Christian. The Koran presented the clear, straight path to salvation, to leading the life that the Supreme God, the only God, Allah, wanted you to lead. Yes, there were dietary restrictions similar to the ones in Judaism, such as the prohibition against eating pork. And yes, there was the sense of a cause that was from Zoroastrianism, the sense of being part of a great battle in this world.

On behalf of Allah, one must fight forces of darkness, although the darkness is not in any way a threat to Allah as, in some way, in Zoroastrianism. The darkness does seem to be a threat to Ahura-Mazda, the Lie. All of those things seem to threaten him. Allah is different, but we, as human beings, must fight in order to ensure that things go the right way and that the will of Allah is present here on earth. Also from Zoroastrianism, there is another parallel, and that is the regimented sequence of daily prayers. We've given up sacrifice here, and that's true of many of the revealed religions. The idea of offering things to a god, a god who is hungry, a god who desires gifts, is put aside as sort of a childish thing and replaced by the idea that what God wants from you is prayer, is praise, and is a promise on your part that you will follow the right path. That should be succeeded by actions that prove you're going to do it.

The requirements of Allah on those who would follow the path, those who would submit to the path of Islam, included the routine of the multiple prayers at specific times during the day and of the Hajj, the pilgrimage that would take you to the religious center of the faith. A number of other requirements were also made, but it was crystal clear what you needed to do, what you needed to believe, in a way that we have not experienced with the other revealed faiths. One of the things that Mohammad did after experiencing his revelation, which was a revolution as well, was to go to Mecca, that center for the worship of what he considered idols, those images of the animistic, tribal traditions and smash them. And at that point, he had hoped, I believe, that people would see the light. But they didn't, and he had to flee in the year 622 of the Christian era, and that became the dawning of a new age in Islam. Years were now renumbered as the calendar was reset to start from that year as the beginning of a new age in this world.

Within his own lifetime, his converts had begun to spread the faith partly by conversion, partly simply by explaining this wonderful, straightforward new path in life with submission to Allah and his will at the end of it. It was also spread through battle, through conquests, and it was spread, at times, by converting leaders of entire kingdoms, who would then bring all of their subject population over to the new faith of Islam. This is what carries us over to west Africa.

You may be aware that within a generation of Mohammad's death, there was already a breaking up of the pure, straightforward

stream and path that he had envisioned, and different sects of Islam appeared, some based around members of his own family. Ultimately, there was one sect, Sufi Islam, that spread westward across the Sahara. When it came into the area of the modern nation of Mali, it encountered a king in the 1200s, the 13<sup>th</sup> century of our era. So, we're about 600 years after Mohammad's own time. The North African desert and the Mediterranean part of Africa had been conquered much more quickly and brought over to Islam because of all the old Roman trading routes and highways still in place. But the conversion movement swept westward. Ultimately, it got down into equatorial Africa, and this king, at a place called Jenne, brought over his kingdom to the faith, to Islam, and everyone converted also.

Now, Jenne—which is spelled “J-E-N-N-E,” or sometimes spelled with an initial “D” in front of the “J”: “D-J-E-N-N-E”—was a great city on a bend of the Niger River. We'll describe the Niger River and the setting in a moment. Its king controlled a vast area. As he became a convert to Sufi Islam, he brought hundreds of thousands of people with him. He built at Jenne an extraordinary mosque that used the adobe architecture of traditional sub-Saharan Africa and applied it to this purpose of creating a place of worship for this new religion. It had great towers on it. It was roughly square in shape, projecting beams of the forest trees that were holding it together came out of the sides in a terrifically strong statement of strength and of faith. It's very hard for an adobe structure to survive for 800 years. So, when you go to Jenne today, you will see a mosque on that same spot. It is probably a duplicate of the mosque that was created by that first king to convert, but it was rebuilt in 1906, and the actual adobe timber that you are seeing now is only dating from that time.

There, in west Africa, Sufi Islam was very successful in a way that some other branches of Islam would not have been. Many of the things that divided the different sects of Islam were the ideas about the purity and the closeness of one's adherence to the strict law. There were ideas that there could be accommodation that formed themselves around this Sufi sect of Islam, accommodations to all those natural desires that people had been bringing to their religious experience now for tens of thousands of years—certain cults, rituals, help from religious specialists that the core movement back in Arabia found abhorrent but which, in the process of absorbing other peoples, spreading to other lands, and accommodating other faiths, had begun to make changes in Sufi Islam. We will see the same

thing, not in this course, but in other courses you will encounter, histories of Christianity that make it clear how much Christianity was changed and transformed by its contact with, and conversion of, non-Christian peoples, each of whom seemed to have added some of their traditional way of doing things and some of their rituals and beliefs to this new religion.

If we want to return to the land of Mexico, where we've already visited religious rituals at Palenque and Teotihuacan, we might think of the way that the local Aztec people and other Mexican peoples did ultimately embrace Roman Catholicism, but we're able to infuse it with many of their own observances, many of their own traditional faiths. If we think of the Día de los Muertos, the Day of the Dead, which is such an important part of Roman Catholicism in Mexico that harks back much more to the ancestor worship, and the veneration for the dead that we see in places like Palenque and Teotihuacan, than to anything that is in the actual dogma and creeds of the Roman Catholic religion as practiced back in Italy or Spain, which is where the conquistadors came from.

But we return to west Africa. Jenne flourished under these Islamic dynasties. It became a bastion of Islam far away from the centers. And as people began to write its history later on, a lot of the innovations that were seen at Jenne, such as a technology of iron use and so on, were attributed to those people who had arrived with Islam. It was believed that that was a new beginning for the culture, that most of the sort of marks of what we would think of as a highly developed, civilized city go back to that time. Also, the wide trading network, the idea that Jenne, being only about 220 miles south of Timbuktu, was going to participate in a lively trading system that embraced equatorial Africa, the Sahara, and the Mediterranean, as well as the Near East—that was all assumed to begin with the arrival of those Islamic peoples and the conversion of the local Africans to that new faith.

The team—the archaeological team that got into the roots of Jenne and showed that that idea of new beginnings culturally at the time of Islam that embraced the ironworking and the trade and so on was not correct—were two American archaeologists, Roderick McIntosh and his wife, Susan McIntosh. They were, for many years, professors at Rice University. Roderick McIntosh was a fellow archaeology major with me at Yale when we were both undergraduates, and we went to Cambridge



University together and studied there for our doctorates. At a time in 1980, when I was still messing around with boats and studying the ancestry of Viking long ships, Rod McIntosh and Susan McIntosh had excavated the lost city of old Jenne, Jenne-jeno, a few kilometers away from the modern city of Jenne and had shattered the ideas about when ironworking began in west Africa, when this community on a bend of the Niger River became a player in international trade, and when complex urban life began in this part of Africa.

They got into the site because they were studying aerial photographs. Now, think of the times we've already seen where an aerial photograph has opened up a new world. We can think of those pilots flying over the Nazca Desert in the 1930s, other pilots flying over the Four Corners region of the American Southwest in the 1970s and seeing, for the first time, that network of roads converging on Chaco Canyon. The same thing happened here at Jenne. The McIntoshes had gotten hold of hundreds of aerial photos of an extraordinary region of which Jenne, modern Jenne City, is the urban heart that is called the inland delta of the Niger River. The Niger is an extraordinary stream. It's 2,000 miles long. It starts quite near the Atlantic Ocean in Guinea over near the west African coast, and then angles up to the northeast as if it's going to run straight out into the Sahara desert, but just as it gets to the edge of the desert at Timbuktu, it seems to think better of it, and it bends down like a boomerang to the southeast now, and finally, finally reaches the Atlantic Ocean in the Bight of Benin, that great notch in the African coast, in a delta that is so vast, so complex, so filled with channels and islands, that it was initially believed to be (by Europeans coming from the sea) not a river mouth at all, but just a coastal wetland. In fact, the Niger River was one of the last great rivers of Africa to be studied, and mapped, and fully explored. Up there where the bend is, by Jenne and Timbuktu, the Niger ran into country where its slope of land was so slight that it spread out as if in a delta.

So, we get one of the rarest of all geographical forms, an inland delta, where the river silts up its own bed and its own floodplain and creates islands, marshes, lakes, little raised areas, a perfect place for what we call incipient agriculture, the beginnings of farming. Sure enough, one of the things that the McIntoshes found down at the bottom of the mounds that they were digging (because [of] what they saw in the aerial photograph in that inland delta of the Niger River was a series of mounds, a series of tells, a few kilometers away from

the modern city of Jenne, with its great Islamic mosque that seemed to bear witness to a more ancient community, a community that had been abandoned some time in the past—sure enough, they went there. They excavated into those mounds. They began this in the 1970s. They had their sort of report filed to the world by 1980 on the extraordinary discoveries that they had made. The mounds were about 40 feet high and as they got down into the last 15 feet or so, the lowest, there they found the seeds, the remains of the early crops that those first west African farmers had been planting there as they moved into this region of the inland delta.

They seemed to have moved from the Sahara region to the north as the Sahara dried out, which by 300 B.C., it was starting to do in a very serious way. Former hunting and herding peoples who had roamed the Savannah of what was a fairly well-watered area, now claimed by the desert, were pushed further and further south until they came to this inland delta of the Niger River. That was the foundation time of the community that they have called Jenne-jeno, old Jenne. What they were able to show was that, in a short time, it had become, in its own right, long before the modern city of Jenne ever existed, a great urban center, that it was filled with ironworkers, with craft specialists of all kinds, with musicians, sorcerers, farmers, architects, rulers. But rulers were scattered through the city in a way that showed that there were many sources of power. Think back to Chaco, our different clan heads. Rod McIntosh came up with a term for this—"heterarchy," instead of monarchy, just one ruler, a heterarchy, many different rulers spread out within a community, each with their own source of power, and authority, and control.

It was an extraordinary place, this Jenne-jeno, but one of the things that they were most interested in was the evidence for ironworking, because this was believed to be such a high and advanced technology that it surely had been brought in by the Islamic people, who came along with their faith sometime in the 1200s, so long after Jenne-jeno had already been established and grown into a great urban complex. They were very interested to find some workshops (we might use a term from the French, *atelier*) of these different ironworkers. What they found was that the ore, which had to be brought from a long way off because there weren't mountains that carried iron ore in that area, was smelted in workshops around the periphery, outside the urban zone, as if that process was either too secret or perhaps too dangerous to be done surrounded by the hustle and bustle of a busy city.

So, the ore is smelted. It's freed of its dross, that's the rocky part in which the iron ore had been contained. It's smelted. It's brought into the city then in the form of pure iron that's ready to be forged, heated up to a point where it could be hammered into shape. These smiths, like the smiths of the classical world of Greece and Rome, never got to the point that they could heat iron hot enough to actually cast it. It wouldn't melt, but it would get red hot, malleable, and then could be formed into ornaments, tools, and weapons. These were the stock and trade, as they believed at first, of these ironworkers.

There was one workshop in particular that attracted their attention. It was from high up in the mound, high up in the tell, and it dated to the levels that go back to about the year 800 of our era; so, Charlemagne's getting grounded in Rome. The Holy Roman Empire is rising in Europe, and down in this area of the inland Niger delta, a blacksmith, an ironworker, built a shop. They recognized all the typical elements of an ironworker's shop, a blacksmith's shop. There were the anvil stones. There were the pieces of ore. There were the furnaces, and so on—these little tulares, as they're called, miniature chimneys built of earth, clay, lots and lots of things, the pits in order to contain the fire. It was all there. It seemed very normal, until they got to one side and found a stone structure. It was a stone structure put together, sort of a miniature platform, but maybe not that miniature. It was about two meters (six feet) across. It stood about chest high, about four feet high, and it was made entirely of loosely laid pieces of sandstone, flat little slabs of sandstone built up in layers.

Well, archaeologists could never leave anything alone. They started to dismantle it and see what was inside. In the cracks and crevices between the rocks they found magical things. They found the terra cotta statuettes of human forms and animal forms had been deliberately shattered, and their fragments placed within the crevices of this platform. There were bits and pieces of the iron slag and of iron itself also strategically deposited through this platform. This was a ceremonial thing. This was a religious place.

Many crafts have their own religions and their own superstitions. Think of the craft of acting. In our modern world, you're not supposed to quote from Macbeth, and you're supposed to wish somebody that they break a leg when they walk onto stage. These are some of the superstitions—shouldn't whistle in a theater. If we go back to the Roman world, we know that potters had superstitions.

Kilns had been excavated in Italy where the demons that might cause the pottery to break in the kiln during the firing process are sort of exhorting, or called up, on a little tablet, and the gods of the kiln are being asked to prevent these demons who have names like "smasher" from breaking up the pottery, because it's a risky business. We know that any human activity that involves risk is likely to generate a religious response, a ritual, which attempts to give the practitioner control over the process if they will only do the right thing and perform the correct ceremony.

Within the Greek world, there were actually strange, supernatural beings associated with the working of metal and of crafts. They were called the Kabeiroi, and their domain was the island of Samothrace, where that famous winged victory of Samothrace comes from. There were annual rites. There were annual, mysterious, religious cult ceremonies held on Samothrace. That's where the mother and father of Alexander the Great met. They'd both gone to this great religious ceremony that involved craftsmen and metal workers but to which many could come to celebrate these holy rites. This is what the McIntoshes found was true for these blacksmiths, these ironworkers of Jenne-jeno. Their rites were not just for themselves. They were not just rites of the smithy.

On the contrary, they were serving as specialists in religion to their communities. Much of this had to be built up through what I've called ethnographic parallels, and the McIntoshes were tireless in questioning local people about the role of the blacksmith. They found out that blacksmiths were diviners who would provide oracular service to the local people. They would perform rituals like circumcision, purification of the male body in youth for religious purposes. They would be healers who knew the use of all kinds of herbs in the outlying forests or along through the fields and could create medicines out of them. They were weather makers.

From 300 B.C. onward, that part of the world has been subject to droughts of longer and shorter dimensions, but some of them lasting virtually for centuries in that kind of time where we have societies, as we've seen before in other places, living on the edge. The society was likely to attribute to certain people within that group religious powers, magical powers, to help bring the rain, to help control the weather. We could see a little bit of this in the Old Testament, where Elijah is tested by the king of northern Israel (what's going to grow

into the Samaritan faith, King Ahab and his Phoenician wife Jezebel), and the test is, can you make the rain? He does, and he asks if there are any idols among you heathen who can make the rain.

That's the power that these ironsmiths, these blacksmiths, down in Jenne-jeno, old Jenne, must have had, judging from this rainmaking platform, because that's what it turned out to be. This is the platform on which the sacrifices are made and the rituals are carried out that ensure that the community will get what they need. We've been talking about communities of faith. There were Marabouts, among the Sufi Islamic community who also promised to make the rain, and work spells for people, and do divination, but the ironworkers lived on because they came from a more indigenous source, because people felt more comfortable with them, and because their success rate was apparently very good. So, these rituals help bind together a guild, a sacred community of ironworkers who did pilgrimages in their youth from forge to forge, to learn the skills, who would marry into the families of other ironworkers, and who kept among themselves as a Community of the Spirit, right through the centuries of Islamic religious dominance in their homeland, some of the indigenous traditions that their ancestors had developed more than 2,000 years ago, and have brought them forward—as we can see through these mounds at Jenne-jeno. The mystical platforms for divination and rainmaking associated with blacksmith shops have brought them forward even to our own time, a remarkable testimony to the enduring power of any Community of the Spirit.

## Lecture Thirty-Five

### Carving Monasteries at Ajanta in India

#### Scope:

Like Christianity and Islam, Buddhism encouraged the creation of monastic communities, where men and women could withdraw from the corrupt outside world and live according to religious rather than secular laws. During a tiger hunt in 1819, British soldiers stumbled on a long-lost Buddhist monastery complex cut into the basalt cliffs at Ajanta in central India. The five temple caves and two dozen monastery caves were all artificial, cut into sheer rock above a horseshoe river bend between 200 B.C. and 500 A.D. The monks' cells, courtyards, and places of worship were decorated with statuary and a unique collection of painted murals—a sort of Buddhist Lascaux. The setting and the artworks were unusual, but the monasteries at Ajanta were in fact part of a constellation of monasteries that attest to the powerful attraction such habitations held for thousands of believers during Buddhism's golden age.

#### Outline

- I. In April 1819, John Smith rediscovered India's Ajanta Caves.
  - A. They had once housed a Buddhist monastery and had last been active almost 1,400 years earlier.
  - B. Archaeologists have been trying to understand how they were built and to decipher the inscriptions and iconography.
  - C. There are two phases in this remarkable monument, so we will look at the first phase of cave building, talk about Buddhism, and then look at the second building phase.
- II. The caves are monuments to the Buddhist religion.
  - A. They were built during Buddhism's ascendancy in central India but were abandoned altogether in the 7<sup>th</sup> century when India's Hindu ruling class banned Buddhism.
  - B. Buddhism's origins can be traced to about 485 B.C. with the birth of a prince, Siddhartha Gautama.
  - C. At Siddhartha's birth, a sage predicted that if he was kept from the world, he would become a great king, but if he was exposed to the world, he would turn to the religious life.

- D. Siddhartha fulfilled the sage's prediction, abandoning his family and his inheritance to seek a more just and righteous way of life.
  - E. He initially plunged into asceticism but then decided to practice "awareness of breath"; he would sit, meditate, and think about the act of being alive.
  - F. Sitting under a Bodhi tree, Siddhartha experienced a transformation.
    - 1. He was assaulted by a great demon, Mara, who tried to turn him from his path, but he endured.
    - 2. He achieved awakening.
    - 3. "Buddha" means "the awakened one," or "the enlightened one," and this became his designation.
    - 4. He became a monk, founded an order, and devoted himself to bringing others to awareness.
  - G. The Buddha is viewed as the first to preach this path; he was followed by bodhisattvas, ones who had achieved enlightenment and now helped others to do the same.
    - 1. The bodhisattvas show up in great numbers in later Buddhist art.
    - 2. There was an initial prohibition against depicting the Buddha, because he did not want to be treated as a god.
- III. The Buddhist faith was founded on some basic ideas.
- A. The first set of ideas is called the three jewels.
    - 1. The first is the idea of the Buddha, the awakened one.
    - 2. The second is the dharma, the Buddha's teachings.
    - 3. The third is the community centered on these teachings.
  - B. The second set is the four basic points about human life.
    - 1. Life leads to suffering.
    - 2. Suffering is caused by the desire for things.
    - 3. The way to escape from suffering is to stop wanting.
    - 4. The Buddha has shown the way to do this.
- IV. The Ajanta Caves show two different forms of Buddhism: one from about 100 B.C. and the other from 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D.
- A. The original six caves were created for a monastic group.
  - B. They were built using stone chisels, hammers, and mallets.
    - 1. Workers were lowered on ropes from the top of the cliffs to carve out the chambers and details.

- 2. They also made depressions in the floor for water so that sunlight would hit the water and be reflected onto the ceilings and walls for the mural painters.
  - C. The mural painters were armed with twig and animal hair brushes and only six colors; they painted stories about the lives of the Buddha, called Jatakas, and Buddhist symbols.
    - 1. The stories sometimes took place at the courts of kings and gave the artists a chance to depict court life, which becomes important in the second phase of the building.
    - 2. The first set of images was painted around 100 B.C.
  - D. In 460–480 A.D., King Harisena of the Vakataka dynasty took a new interest in the long-deserted caves and brought back Buddhism in a new form, in which the Buddha is a god and is depicted in the art.
  - E. Great halls of worship were created.
    - 1. The biggest hall is cave number 10, and it has a stupa.
    - 2. A stupa is a mound containing some bones or the remains of the Buddha and other holy treasures.
  - F. We can see a transformation of Buddhism, elements flowing into the faith from sources that Siddhartha could not have anticipated and that do not fit well with his ideas.
  - G. Some of the writings from the walls of the later caves indicate how people balanced desire for a Buddhist spiritual experience with desire for material wealth.
- V. Today, the caves are endangered by monsoons, as well as visitors. But the religious impulse that created the caves endures.

### Suggested Reading:

Behl, *The Ajanta Caves*.

### Questions to Consider:

- 1. A number of religious traditions have developed patterns of monastic life. What common features unite these monasteries, regardless of creed?
- 2. What social conditions would you deduce from the prominent role played by wealthy secular patrons in creating the monastery in the Ajanta Caves?

## Lecture Thirty-Five—Transcript

### Carving Monasteries at Ajanta in India

Welcome back. On a warm spring day in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, an officer of the British Army in India went tiger hunting. He was up on the Deccan Plateau about 300 miles northeast of Mumbai. He had a group of beaters and fellow officers with him and they were making their way up a tongue of land that was surrounded by horseshoe bend of the Wagura River at a place where the Wagura, after making that horseshoe bend, tumbled down a seven-tier waterfall. That made the bend itself inaccessible to river traffic coming up from below since the waterfall stopped boats from going higher, and it also made this a very isolated and little-known spot.

They were going through a dense scrub of Mimosa trees and tamarins. They were moving quietly so as not to alarm any tigers that might be out there. When they came to the edge of an escarpment and saw in front of them the horseshoe bend of the river with the loud noise of the rushing water down below and on the opposite face in the cliff that had been carved through the ages by that river making that turn, they could see why it had swung around. There was a massive deposit of basalt, a very dense, very hard volcanic stone that formed the bedrock of the cliff on the other side. To their amazement, they saw in that cliff face caves, not ordinary natural caves but caves that had been sculpted by the hands of humans, caves with doors, windows, pillars, porticos; something that seemed completely unimaginable in this deserted spot.

So they went down, got to the other side of the river and the officer himself swarmed up the face of the rock, managed to clamber up to one of the doors and enter. He found himself in a fantastic hall with elaborate carvings and colonnades inside, niches, doorways to other rooms, and everywhere paintings, murals on the walls, on the ceilings showing scenes that he could dimly make out to be in the style of Indian art, that beautiful fluid style showing beautiful women, strong men, elephants, scenes that were dramatic and also scenes that showed court life. He wandered through these caves, remarking on their beauty but also on their dilapidation. The murals had included the ceiling. These had been painted on plaster. In many cases, they had fallen. It was mixed with animal dung and tracks of peacocks that had wandered through. There were bones here and there, things that had obviously died in the caves including, there

was a human skeleton in one corner but what really stayed with this officer was the incredible beauty of the place. He could not resist getting out his own knife and leaving his own mark, John Smith, April 1819.

This marked the discovery of the Ajanta caves in modern times, caves that had last been in active use almost 1,400 years before John Smith made his discovery, which had been dedicated to worship and to monastic life in the Buddhist tradition and which had been the creation of wealthy patrons, first among the merchants of the area around 100 B.C. and then in a second burst of building by elite aristocratic members of a royal court some 500 years, 600 years after that.

So archaeologists came to the site in the wake of its discovery and for the last couple of centuries have been working at the Ajanta caves trying to understand how they were built, trying to decipher the inscriptions that explain the thoughts of those who created these marvels in stone because there are 29 of these caves, all carved in a row, on the same level in that curving cliff face at the horseshoe bend of the river and also to try to penetrate through the iconography of what's left of these incredible murals, the greatest wonders of Indian art in its golden age.

It's now realized that there are two phases in this remarkable monument. In the period, as I said, around 100 B.C. for a number of years, work was done on six caves, six rather modest monastic caves. We know who was responsible because they put their names on them, and they are not the monks. They are local wealthy people who contributed money so that the caves could be carved. Their names, which seem to be the names of wealthy merchants, the Ajanta site lies on a cross-continental highway between Mumbai on the west side of India and the Bay of Bengal on the east side. So these merchants who were used to using this as a caravan route gave money and just as on a modern college campus or an art center, you will see the names of the patrons who gave the stage, the green room, this lecture hall, that chemistry lab, prominently displayed on the door. The wealthy merchants who had no intention of becoming monks themselves, nonetheless, intended to acquire merit through this Buddhist religion by paying to create the monastery in the rocks. So they left their names there to remind the whole world of their good deed. They were materialistic people themselves, but by making this gift, they would enter that spiritual realm.

Now we've encountered monasteries before, and we certainly saw, when we were at Qumran, the idea of community that withdrew from the world certainly anyone who went to the Ajanta caves and settled down there in one of those monasteries would have withdrawn from the world in the same way. But let's look at the building of the caves, talk about Buddhism, and then move forward and look at the second great flowering of the caves at Ajanta when the final 23 were carved between 460 and 480 A.D.

These caves are monuments to the Buddhist faith, the Buddhist religion, which for centuries in the great sub-continent of India, has been in a state of sometimes balance, sometimes struggle with the older traditions of Hinduism, which we saw at Anchor. You may remember, as I explained very briefly at the end of the Anchor lecture that at Anchor that same collision of religions went on. The great temples were dedicated by the kings of the Khmer Empire to Hindu gods such as Sheba or Vishnu but they were succeeded by Buddhist cults and by kings who had embraced the Buddhist faith, Hinduism then came back at Anchor and then finally Buddhism a second time took over until the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the site was opened to the world. It was a destination purely for Buddhist pilgrims.

So these two religions have been in conflict. The Ajanta caves were built during times when Buddhism was ascendant in central India, and they were abandoned at times when Hinduism rose to eminence and the local rulers embraced that faith. They were finally abandoned altogether in the 7<sup>th</sup> century of our era when not only did those who followed Hinduism gain the upper hand but Buddhism was actually a banned religion in India ironically because it was in the northern part of India that Siddhartha Gautama, the man who became the Buddha, did his preaching. So Buddhism then was well known in the Himalayas, Nepal, Tibet, in China, in southeast Asia, in Japan but in the land where it was originally preached because of the resurgence of Hinduism, Buddhism became a proscribed religion but that's still to come.

Let's cast ourselves far back in time to about 485 B.C. if we take the traditional chronologies literally. At that time when the great kings of Persia like Darius and Xerxes were planning their assaults on Greece and ruling an empire that stretched all the way to the Indus Valley, so quite close to the motherland of Buddhism. A prince was born again according to tradition in Nepal, and his name was Siddhartha

Gautama. And when he was born a holy man, a sage, told his father the king that if he could be kept from the world, he would become a great king but if he was exposed to the world, he would turn instead to a religious life. Now the king wanted an heir. So he kept young Siddhartha Gautama walled up in a great garden. Nonetheless after marrying and having a child, he got out, and he saw the world. He saw old age. He saw disease. He saw death, and then he saw an ascetic philosopher, a holy person who had decided to give up material things and even essential bodily needs and comforts such as adequate food in order to try to withdraw from the sufferings of the world.

At that point, Siddhartha Gautama fulfilled the prediction of the holy man given at his birth. He abandoned the palace. He abandoned his royal inheritance, and he decided to seek out a more just and righteous way of life. He initially plunged into asceticism, that way of achieving goodness or spiritual righteousness that Zoroaster, if you remember, had forbidden because he felt that it was of no use. You needed to operate and be a force for good in the ordinary world, and you would be weakened if you devoted yourself to ordeals and trying to deny basic natural bodily urges. Nonetheless, that was the first way that young Siddhartha tried to follow, and he came to the same conclusion that it was wrong, that it was not leading toward the enlightenment that he sought.

So rather than the deprivation of food and sleep and the withdrawal from human society, he decided to practice something called awareness of breath, where he would sit and he would meditate, and he would simply think about the act of being alive. I think this carries us back to that link we've seen between the concept of breath and the concept of spirit, remember that *anima*, in Latin, is both and that the Greek words for breath and for spirit are very similar. So sitting there under a tree, a fig tree, the Bodhi tree, Siddhartha had a great transformation. After many days, and after in later tradition being pictured as assaulted by a great demon, Mara, who was trying to turn Siddhartha from his path in the same way that young shamans, at least as recorded by people like Bull Lodge or Sanapia, those medicine men and medicine women of Native American tribes, they would be assaulted by evil spirits trying to turn them from their paths. He endured through this. And after a number of days under this tree, he achieved the awakening that he sought. To say the awakened one or as sometimes it's translated, the enlightened one, that word is Buddha. That became his designation.

From then on, he decided that he would give up the quest for earthly things, and he would seek to be a monk in this world, found an order of monks, devote himself to teaching and bring others to an awareness of the great bliss that he felt and the awareness, the being awakened to the realities of this universe, one's own place in it and what it took to achieve happiness and help others achieve happiness, because this is not a purely self-centered religion at all. In fact, the holiest people are those who, in these cycles of existence because this was a religion that had picked up the idea of reincarnation, the transmigration of souls in a way, although your own personality does not jump from body to body through the cycles of reincarnation. Nonetheless, the idea was that if you get to the point where you could step out of the cycle of rebirths and of material things, you would nonetheless refuse to do so. You would become a bodhisattva, one who had remained in this earthly world to help others achieve enlightenment.

So in a way, Buddha is unique and the first and the one who preached this new good news about how to escape the sufferings of the world. In another sense, he is just viewed as one of many who are doing this good work. So the bodhisattvas show up in great numbers in later Buddhist art. There was a prohibition at the beginning on depicting the Buddha himself because the last thing he wanted was to be venerated or even worshiped as a god or as a deity. The Buddhist faith that he handed down to his followers and that they then spread throughout India and ultimately through many parts of Asia was based on some basic ideas. One was what were called the three jewels, the idea of the Buddha, the awakened one, that's the first jewel, the dharma, which are the teachings of Buddha, and finally the community that centers around Buddhist teachings and that, of course, is our theme in these last lectures of our course, the Community of the Spirit and that is the third jewel of Buddhist doctrines.

There were also four basic points to make about the relationship of Buddhism to human life. First of all, that life leads to suffering, just being alive leads to suffering. The second point of the four, suffering is caused by desire for things. That's what makes you suffer. It's wanting things that you don't have. Third, the way to escape from suffering is stop wanting, stop experiencing that emotion that the Greeks would call eros, which is a sort of greedy, self-centered desire to own and possess things or in an erotic relationship, other people. Finally a recognition that the Buddha has shown the way and we've

had this concept before among our revealed religions that the founder of the religion showed the path, showed the way to achieve this.

So it was a very disembodied faith. It rejected material things much as Jesus would do some five centuries later. Remember Buddha is living in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C., born about 485, reckoned to have died toward the end of that century at about the age of 80. But in his lifetime, he taught a circle of disciples. He traveled widely. He was what was called a mendicant but he enjoyed life. He was not a dour and grim ascetic, withdrawn from the world. He mingled with people of all classes rich and poor. He was surrounded by these disciples, and he left enough teachings that there was a possibility for many interpretations. Through time, as Buddhism explored the implications of the different statements within the original body of texts, and as Buddhism collided with indigenous traditions elsewhere, it developed many different forms to the point where some people think today you can't meaningfully call Buddhism one religion.

Well let's go back to the Ajanta caves, and we're going to see that there were two different kinds of Buddhism at those caves, one in the earliest period about 100 B.C. and the other at the later period in the 5<sup>th</sup> century of our era. Now we've got kind of an idea of these Buddhist doctrines and concepts and the idea of the monastic life is at the beginning of Buddhism because Buddha himself becomes a monk devoted to the spirit life and surrounding himself with like-minded individuals who will create a community whose sole purpose is to allow one to live free of desire and helping others achieve that same freedom. The Ajanta caves, as first conceived, those first six caves around 100 B.C., they're created as places where monastic groups and, in this case, it appears to have been all men but there were certainly nuns in Buddhism as well, they were settled in these six caves that were hewn out of the rock.

We know that the tools and the technology behind the building of this, as with Stonehenge, they were very simple. They've been found down by the river in archaeological excavations there. They were simple stone chisels and hammers and mallets. The workers were apparently lowered on ropes from the top of the cliffs, would cut first a line in the cliff face that was going to be the roof or the top of the doors and windows, and then from that began to hollow out working their way down, the vertical face but leaving behind, freestanding, all of the things that would be the door frames, window frames,



columns, and the fretwork decoration that was going to cover the front of the cave because these were meant to imitate the houses of the wealthy or palatial buildings in the great population centers of that time of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries B.C.

Then, these builders would cut through and hollow out the chambers themselves, the different rooms, and leaving again freestanding pillars and other structures as they went, they also made depressions in the floor that could be filled with water so that after the carvers had done their work, which is very arduous in this hard basalt, water could be poured into these shallow basins on the floor and the sunlight striking in to these artificial caves would hit the water, be reflected up onto the ceilings and walls and allow the second group of workers, the mural painters to come in and do their work. They were armed with the simplest of pallets and the simplest of tools. Their brushes were simply twigs to which some hairs, animal hairs, had been attached to form the brushes. They had only six colors, and we're familiar with the first four, black and white and then red and yellow, the red and yellow coming from those iron oxide ochers that we've encountered at so many sites before either used ceremonially or artistically as in the caves of Paleolithic western Europe. But they also had green by grinding up malachite. They had blue from grinding up lapis lazuli.

So with this pallet, simple but rich, the painters began to create on the walls visual representations of stories about the Buddha as well as other Buddhist symbols. Now these stories were called Jatakas, and they were the folklore of Buddhism, its set of myths. They were also a little like the Arabian Nights in that they are a set of interlinked tales with a single theme. That theme is what were the lives of the Buddha, a Siddhartha Gautama, before he became that prince and before he experienced the incarnation in which he woke up to the realities of the world. So we see the scenes where he is the son of an old hunter and a hunter's wife. They, because of some sin in early existence, are now blind. The son must do everything for them. When he comes to a time when he himself through an accident, is dying, he cries out to providence to save him not for himself but for his parents so he can serve this old couple who depend on him for everything, and he is restored to life. Well this was treated as a series of panels. You could walk, you could do a little pilgrimage, through that chamber as you went from scene to scene of this particular Jataka.

The Jatakas are not always about the previous incarnations as people. In one of them, the Buddha was an elephant living in a big cave and triumphing over the rest of the herd as a great leader of elephants. In others, he is the son of kings and queens. But in all of them, there's a story to tell of performing a right action in a difficult setting and therefore moving one step closer. There were about 500 of these Jatakas to choose from. They were arrayed very beautifully around the walls of the Ajanta caves as the principle source of the iconography. Since the story sometimes took place at the courts of kings, because in previous incarnations, Siddhartha Gautama had been also in those other lives, a prince, a son of kings and queens. It gave a chance for the artist to depict court life. This becomes very important in the second phase of the building.

Around 100 B.C., we have our first set of images. The Buddha himself is never represented. That was forbidden. He could only be shown in a sort of aniconic way in early Buddhist art by things like a pair of big footprints to show that the Buddha had, his presence was here from the footprints. That's not really an image. We may think of our Scandinavian rock art from the Bronze Age, where mysterious footprints show up on the rocks and may indeed be intended to give the impression that a divine being has stood there in this same way that was used in early Buddhist art. By the time King Harisena of the Vakataka dynasty in about 460 and then for the next two decades up until about 480, by the time King Harisena and his courtiers take a new interest in these long deserted caves, bring life back to them, breathe activity and new spiritual life into these caves, by that time, we've been through another period where Hinduism had been in the ascendancy. Buddhism has now come back, but it is in a new form. In this new form, Buddha has become the last thing that Siddhartha Gautama would've ever had wanted to be. He's become a god. His own image has become an object of veneration.

So in the new caves, we see the glories of the Vakataka court with the dancing and the beautiful dress and the elaborate court life all pretending to show you the Jataka stories but we also see the Buddha, sometimes monumental, seated in meditation, an object himself of veneration. In most of the chambers, old and new, are monasteries but now great halls of worship are also created. The biggest hall is cave number 10, and it's got in many of these new halls of worship, a stupa inside. Now what's a stupa? This is another thing that I think the Buddha would have abominated. The idea was



that when he died, he was cremated and the remains were scattered around to places as objects of reverence. We can see a comparison to this in the Christian tradition about relics centering around the Holy Grail or the True Cross or the Holy Grail being identified with the cup at the Last Supper. Jesus certainly said nothing about venerating the cup. He wanted followers to remember Him, to treat each other, help each other, love each other as he had done at this loving meal, but the cup became a focus of veneration of ideas, of quests. Buddhism undergoes the same transformation. Those ashes of the Buddha first and later, other relics, become very important. A stupa is a mound. That's all the word and the other words that mean that object originally conveyed, a mound, a circular dome-like mound with, inside it, some little bit of the bones or the remains of the Buddha and other holy things also and treasures that have been put inside all under this dome-like mound that reminds us very much of those Native American mounds, those earth works that we've encountered also that had the dead buried inside. Stupas of that kind are often out in the outer air. There was one 400-feet tall that was one of the glories of Buddhist architecture, but they're also in these caves presided over by the Buddha.

So in this way, we can see a transformation of Buddhism. We can see elements flowing into this faith from sources that Siddhartha Gautama himself, in his own lifetime, could not have anticipated and really that do not fit well with his ideas. I'd like to read you some of the dedication writings from the walls of these later caves, which give us an idea of how people in a material world, very much like our own, who want to have a spiritual experience and want to get right with these universal ideas of right and wrong, that the Buddha expressed but don't want to give up their wealth. Here's how they dealt with it.

It said in one of these inscriptions that the donor offers this gift for the attainment of spiritual health by good persons. There's a competitive element in some of these inscriptions. One was dedicated by a man of great riches unimaginable to men of small souls. So we can see now the linking of great possessions to great spirit. Then the longest one, this is by a monk, a monk named Buddha Badra, that must be his sacred religious name, and he wrote a justification for the idea that great wealth should be harnessed to spiritual purposes. Is there a reason why a monument should not be erected by rich men with great possessions who desire worldly

happiness as well as spiritual freedom? A man continues to enjoy bliss in paradise so long as he is remembered in this world. It is therefore right to erect memorials on mountains that will last as long as the sun and moon endure. We should, from our long journey through so many other sites, we should recognize that impulse we've encountered before, the impulse to create something that will make people remember you. That includes the pyramids in Egypt. That includes the tombs of imperial China, and we find it here now grafted onto the Buddhist idea.

Five years after John Smith discovered the caves in 1819, a fellow officer of the 16<sup>th</sup> lancers, a man named James Alexander, who was a lieutenant, also came to the caves. He disguised himself as a local hunter because it was a dangerous area to come into if you didn't have a whole troop of tiger hunters with you. He walked through the caves, and he came out marveling at their beauty, and he wrote in his little notebook some lines from an ode by the Latin poet Horace. They start in the Latin, "*Quae non imber edax ...*," but the message is this: This thing I have seen, this cannot be destroyed by eroding rain or mighty winds or passing years or flight of time. Well Alexander was wrong. The Ajanta caves are being destroyed by monsoon rains, by winds, by time, by the visitors who come now in the millions to see these caves but what does endure is that original impulse that created the caves, the impulse to seek a place where Communities of the Spirit can gather and through their prayers, through their meditations, through their common quest, can achieve true immortality for that purpose that transcends all others, the purpose of seeking enlightenment and understanding.

## Lecture Thirty-Six

### Faiths Lost and Found

#### Scope:

What do archaeological discoveries reveal about religion? Looking back over our selection of sites, we are struck by the universality of religious practices and the central place they occupy in most cultures and civilizations. Not only does religious belief seem to be hardwired into human consciousness, but very specific manifestations seem to appear in widely separated times and places: mystical meaning assigned to caves; erection of mounds, megaliths, and pyramids; cremation; ritual human sacrifice; divine honors paid to rulers; temples housing images of gods; religious specialists, whether shamans or priests; and creation of artificial sacred enclosures and landscapes keyed to the heavens. Ancient traditions outlive the religions from which they originated and are woven into the fabric of later religious experience, art, and ritual. Above all, archaeology shows how religion lies at the core of every society's perception of its own identity.

#### Outline

- I. In our final lecture, we explore some themes that have run through the course and recur in widely scattered times and places.
  - A. We talk about some enduring elements of human religion.
  - B. We close with a reflection on the place that religion occupies in culture, history, and life.
- II. First we look at three symbols that seem to be part of the religious idea, starting with the cave.
  - A. More than 40,000 years ago at Shanidar cave, Neanderthals interred the bodies of their beloved dead, creating a sacred space and a dwelling for the spirits.
  - B. Caves then became sacred spaces where the living could receive enlightenment, as at Lascaux and Altamira.
  - C. The cave is an important element in many religious cults.
    1. In Mayan ceremonial centers, nearby caves were filled with offerings—obviously places of cult worship.
    2. At the Acropolis, the cave was a great symbol of religious enlightenment and experience.

#### III. Our second symbol is the sun.

- A. This symbol begins to dominate when people shift from hunting and gathering to agriculture.
- B. In many cultures, including the Natchez, Cahokian, Egyptian, and Incan, leaders were identified with the sun.
- C. The sun dominates in religions that were held by just a small community of people as well as in great world religions.
- D. The sun is a symbol of enlightenment—the change from the darkness to the light that is an essential part of the duality that lies at the heart of so many religions.

#### IV. Our third symbol is animals.

- A. We first encountered the bull in Altamira in 15,000 B.C. and saw it again in Çatalhöyük, Knossos, and Rome. It is important in many other religions in many parts of the world.
- B. The same symbol having the same importance in cultures half a world apart has convinced historians of the diffusionist theory of human history.
- C. Sir Walter Raleigh expressed an antidiffusionist idea: The human mind has the ability to look at an array of means and materials that exist worldwide and choose the same things and craft the same objects and practices from them.

#### V. What are some of the enduring elements of religion?

- A. Concerns about the afterlife are variations on a theme: Ritual is how you deal with grief.
- B. Another element is creating sacred space and time.
  1. The importance of place depended on certain geological features, enhanced with buildings, symbolic and religious art, and the paraphernalia of human ceremony.
  2. A sacred place will often be held sacred by a succession of religions.
  3. Time itself becomes religious because it is reckoned carefully, especially by agricultural communities.
  4. Many religions have made a huge effort to understand the sky in order to understand time.
- C. There is sacrifice, of either one's possessions or one's life.

- D. Finally, there is the idea of gods.
  1. Religions often develop the idea of grand, superhuman, identifiable deities.
  2. There can also be a supreme god who is not so easily envisioned.
  3. Having created gods, our earliest ancestors strove to get to know them, and that became part of the religious quest for visions.

**VI. What is the place of religion in human culture and in individual human lives?**

- A. In any anthropology textbook and most archaeology textbooks, religion is the last or almost last chapter; it is considered the result of kinship, social, and economic systems that are the real engines of the society.
- B. The counterargument is that religion occupies a primary place in human affairs.
  1. We have seen numerous cases where monuments are entirely devoted to religious purposes.
  2. The ingenuity of engineers and scientists has been devoted to religion while the expenditure of time, knowledge, and wealth was not applied to everyday life.
- C. Religion began on a very personal level, but then came the idea of intermediaries.
  1. Religion first emerged in the family, at the burials of dead loved ones.
  2. It moved to the community through rituals of initiation and enlightenment.
  3. Individuals have always desired to make sacrifices, to be part of the mysteries, and to break through the veil.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. What can we learn by studying the material remains of lost religions that can provide insight into the faiths that dominate the contemporary world?
2. In what ways do the religious experiences of ordinary people differ from those of the elite or the leaders of the state? Based on our analysis of material remains of religious sites, would you say that your own religious experience differs from that of your ancestors?

## Lecture Thirty-Six—Transcript

### Faiths Lost and Found

Welcome back for the last time in this course, to our study of the archaeology of religion. I'm sorry to say that we have now reached the final turn of our long road. The end is in sight, and the time that we've spent together in visiting some of the world's most extraordinary archaeological sites and trying to gain from them insights into the evolution of religion, through time, is just about over. What I'd like to do in our final lecture is try to explore some of the themes that seem to have run consistently through our course that may, in certain cases, take us by surprise by the way that they continue to recur in many widely scattered times and places and then go on to talk about some enduring elements of human religion, which we can trace far back into the past and which still seem to be consistently part of the religious experience today. We'll close then with a reflection on the place that religion occupies in human culture, human history, human life. I hope that some of the insights that we've gained from our archaeological sites may help us see religion in a new perspective, in a perspective perhaps somewhat different from that assigned to it in the traditional social sciences approach that does dominate our American universities today.

First of all, let's look for some common threads, some surprising symbols that seem to be part of the religious idea from the beginning almost and continue to be so through time and in many different places with such consistency that they help lead to the development of that idea of diffusion as the prime force in the development and evolution of human culture, the idea of one specific inventor or founder whose idea is then diffused throughout the world. I'd like to focus on three symbols. The first is the cave. That's where we began a long time ago way back more than 40,000 years in the past at Shanidar cave in Iraq with those Neanderthals living in the cave and interring under the floor of their dwellings, the bodies of their beloved dead comrades and family members, laying them up curled like fetuses, placing, in one instance, flowers in the grave, covering it with a stone.

The cave becomes not just a dwelling place but a sacred place, the dwelling place of the spirit of that dead person because the treatment of the dead in itself shows a belief in the afterlife. We then saw caves considered as sacred spaces for rituals, no longer simply a place to inter the dead but a place where the living can receive enlightenment

and where the torches in these caves can now show fantastic animals at Lascaux, at Altamira, at the other painted caves of western Europe that help to create that sacred space and were used in these rituals, we believe, of initiation for young men, young women in these tribes of hunters.

Caves seem appropriate to the Stone Age. They were very important as places for living. They became less so after that and yet as their economic importance waned, as the importance of caves as places where families and communities to live took a backseat to artificially created caves and dwellings out there in the natural landscape, the cave lost none of its grip on religious fervor. Think of the number of places that we have visited where the cave is an important element in religious cult, in sites like the Maya ceremonial centers. There were often nearby caves that are filled with offerings and that are obviously places of cult. When we went to the Acropolis, we talked about the caves in its side where various deities were worshiped in a city that had a profusion of beautiful stone buildings, many of them of marble, and yet the cave continued to hold its own as a great symbol of religious enlightenment, religious experience. I don't think it's an accident that the best remembered part of the greatest of all philosophical dialogues, the *Republic* by Plato, has nothing to do with the republic or statesmanship or creating the perfect community. It's an image of men in a cave, chained, and looking at the back wall of the cave, where they see shadows passing that are cast by lights behind them on to the back of the cave. This is Plato's nightmarish version of what it is like to live in this world, to be in a cave that is forcing upon you a delusion, an image of reality that is based on shadows and not substance.

Well Plato has turned the idea on its head. His cave is a place where the Lie predominates, as Zoroaster had said, and one of his chained humans breaks the bonds, gets outside and sees the sun, the truth, and spreads that truth then to others and is punished by others for it, for shattering their illusions. That brings us to our second symbol. That seems to run so consistently, the sun, and just as with our caves, we encountered people who, for religious purposes, created humanly made artificial caves, like the Ajanta caves, where we entered our review of sites, cut into a basalt cliff face that never had a cave in it naturally, but it just seemed right that there should be caves or that cave that runs under the great pyramid at Teotihuacan, which most archaeologists believe today is completely artificial, but there needed

to be a cave, a cave for mortals to emerge from the underworld into the light of day in that Mesoamerican religion. When they get into the light, whether it's Plato's philosopher escaping from the cave or those humans emerging into our world after their long entombment underground, they see the sun.

This is, as I said, the second of those recurring symbols I'd like to talk about. It does not seem to be an important symbol to the Stone Age hunters, but in a link between the way people make their living and the symbols that are important to them in the religious sphere, the sun begins to dominate as soon as we get to the time when people have shifted to agriculture. They've domesticated crops, and those crops depend on the sun and the rain far more than any other forces in nature. So we often get principle gods that are thunderers. After all thunder and cloud are things that can actually mask the sun but above all, again and again in so many cultures from the Natchez building their mounds and by extension in this course, you've been presented with the idea that the Cahokians with their much larger urban complex based around mounds, the leaders were identified with the sun up in the heavens. We know Pharaohs of Egypt were identified with the sun. We know that certainly Akhenaten made it a brand new religion, the worship of that Sun Disk that Pachacuti, the Inca there in Peru, millennia after Akhenaten also had a vision of the sun approaching him and, therefore, he instituted this very focused cult of the sun.

In religions that were held by just a small community of people, in great world religions, the sun dominates. I think it's an extraordinary thing that the oldest Christian mosaic that we have shows Jesus on the ceiling in mosaic of one of those catacomb chambers where early Christians were buried and where their families came to share a feast with them, there is Jesus and what is he represented as? Not the good shepherd, not as a teacher, not as a healer or miracle worker. He's represented as the sun god, as Helios, in his first appearance in art. There's certainly, in mosaic art, he is shown in the sun god's chariot. He has the rays of sunlight coming from his head like Helios, and this isn't just a syncretistic image, this is expressing something very important about those special individuals or spiritual beings who are believed to bring light to the world. The sun is itself and at the same time, it is a symbol for the enlightenment, the change from, as Zoroaster would say, the darkness to the light that is an essential part of the duality that lies at the heart of so many religions.

Finally, after the cave and the sun, I would put certain animals, the bull. We encountered it first there in Altamira cave 15,000 or so B.C. seen first after millennia in darkness by little Maria Sautuola, who looked up where her father had only looked down at the floor of the cave, and she saw that rampaging herd of bulls up there on the ceiling of Altamira. But going on from that to our bull at Çatalhöyük in the middle of the small human figures, taunting it, dancing around it, the bull in the game, the bull dance at Knossos that becomes a symbol of that entire civilization, and then the bull of Mithras, sacrificed by the young god of light to emphasize or to symbolize the ultimate triumph of light over darkness. But the bull is important in many other religions in many other parts of the world. In some cases, as I said, these coincidences of applying to the same symbol, the same importance, has convinced historians of human culture and civilization that there must have been links. There must have been connections. That is what, as I've said, we call the diffusionist approach to human history, where we find coincidence, we assume that it must be a historical coincidence rather than something, I would say, deeper.

When I wrote my doctoral dissertation, which was a study of the boats that appeared in those Scandinavian rock art carvings that we studied in one of our lectures and which feature the sun and sun worship, lots of disk people and blazing suns are there on the rocks of southern Scandinavia in that Bronze Age art. When I wrote that dissertation, I was talking about the ways in which the early forms of Viking ships didn't look much like the ships that were being constructed near them, the boats, the watercraft in other parts of Europe nearby or in the polar area, the skin boats that were part of the polar, the Lapland and Inuit tradition. No, I was finding the closest parallels in the South Pacific, in Polynesia or in the central African lakes. I chose them for the epigraph, for my dissertation, a passage from, of all people, Sir Walter Raleigh, which has stuck with me ever since. He was the explorer who tried to get around the world in his ship, the Golden Hind, who discovered San Francisco Bay and the Golden Gate, many adventures. [He] saw human beings all over the earth at a time when the British and indeed many European colonizing nations were starting to set themselves up as superior. He expressed an antidiffusionist idea that I think is always worth bearing in mind, and at the same time a great open-mindedness, a great acceptance of the fact that under the skin, we are all one family.

"Whosoever devised the canoe among the Danubians or among the Gauls, sure I am that the Indians of America never had trade with either of these nations and yet from Froberisher's Strait to the straits of Magellan, the same boats are found. The truth is that all nations, how remote so ever being all reasonable creatures and enjoy one and the same imagination and fantasy, have devised according to their means and materials, the same things," Sir Walter Raleigh, 1614.

Walter Raleigh is leading us to an idea about the human mind; its imagination, its fantasy, its ability to look around at this same array of, as he says, means and materials, which exist worldwide and choose the same things and craft the same objects from them. He was talking about boats, but we can apply it to our religious symbols and beyond that to religious practices, which we're about to explore, the idea that there is a hard wiring in the human mind of a very specific nature that goes beyond what one might think was necessary for simple survival, that it is somehow part of our mind to seize upon certain symbolic things like the cave, like the sun, like the bull or another example, like the snake, which we have seen show up in so many different contexts from the python at Delphi to the protective snake on the Acropolis to Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent to the snake familiar, which I didn't tell you about. We have to face the fact that this whole course was the tip of the tip of an iceberg, but those blacksmiths, those ironworkers of Jenne-jeno, Old Jenne there on the bend of the Niger River, they kept a little box, a stone box in their smith area, to hold the snake that was their familiar spirit and helped work the magic of commanding the rain or divining the future. Snakes, bulls, doves, why are these so consistent? Not because one person had the idea and spread it. We just have drawn out of this hard wiring in our minds some of the same responses.

Now let's take a step further and go into some of the enduring elements of religion. To some extent, these have been the sections of our course, the concern for the afterlife, the universal in all religions with a great array of funeral rituals, ceremonies, offerings to the dead, treatments of the dead body that show tremendous variation through time and space, and yet they are variations on the same theme. A beautiful thing has been said about ritual in the context of these burials. When you are confronted by the death of someone who's meant everything to you, the grief is overwhelming. How do you deal with the grief? Ritual is how you deal with the grief. Ritual is what can somehow, through a shared pattern of rights, ceremonies,

behaviors, formalize mourning, offerings to the dead, knowing, feeling that you are doing the right thing, that you will be able to continue to communicate with the loved one, that you are entrusting the loved one to some being or spiritual force or god on the other side and that you know and the spirit of the dead know they will continue to play an important part in your life. That is part of the bedrock of human religious experience.

Then beyond that, the idea of creating sacred space and sacred time, which we see beginning with those painted caves of western Europe deliberately decorated with art, filled with the sounds of music and visited presumably at certain appointed times of the year for their ceremonies. Let's think about this importance of place, the idea of finding a spring, a rock, as we saw at Claros, where the spring coming up through the rock created the suitable aura that allowed an oracle to be operating there, but this is worldwide. Certain geological features, certain topographical and geographical elements of the landscape attracting the idea of sacredness and then being elaborated through the erection of buildings, through the presentation of symbolic and religious art, and filling them up with the paraphernalia of human ceremony in terms of the songs, the dances, the ritual mimes and dramas, the fantastic costumes, all of this can help convince one that the things that happened there make that a sacred spot, and sacred spots often continue to be picked up and held sacred by a succession of religions in the same way that the great temple at Anchor, built as a temple to Vishnu, ultimately a place of pilgrimage for a completely different religion, that of Buddhism.

All of this and we could multiply those examples a thousand times, show us this idea of sacred space, and once a place has been declared sacred like one of our examples, the Acropolis, it will continue to hold that mystical grip on the human imagination through many changes of religions, through long periods of time. Time itself becomes religious. Time itself is reckoned with far more care than is necessary to figure out when the farmers should plant their crops for religious purposes. The astronomy of Mesopotamia, the astronomy of Mesoamerica, especially that of the Maya, resulted in calendrical systems, understanding of cycles, prediction of eclipses that had a religious point and is in a way the birth of our modern ideas about what science is, the observation, the keeping of records, the prediction of patterns, the perception of overall systems that are hidden in general but shown to us through their workings, the

phenomena that we can interpret, that's what those sky watchers were doing. I think it's striking and ties back to our sun symbol. How many of the religions that we have visited have made this huge effort to understand the sky, Stonehenge oriented to these astronomical events and solar events but just one example of many, New Grange with the midwinter sunrise shining deep into the heart of that artificial cave. Again and again and again, we find the idea of the sacred time being important, and that time predicted by and linked to these astronomical phenomena, these astronomical events, convergences, changes of cycles, all of this is one of those recurring themes, sacred time, sacred space.

Then we get the themes of sacrifice. I say themes because there are, of course, two kinds. There's the sacrifice of something that you possess, the offering of wealth, of an animal, a plant of your own personal possessions to the spirits of the dead or to the gods, but there's also that other kind of sacrifice, the offering not of your possessions but of your own life. In a way that probably seems troubling to us in mainstream America, this has been a recurring element in religion, at least since the Bronze Age. We found massive human sacrifices in all parts of the world, and it is clear to us from the archaeological record that many of these people went to their deaths in religious ceremonies willingly, eyes open, volunteering to make the supreme sacrifice, because it's the right thing to do in terms of their religious teachings and their religious beliefs. Sacrifice of some kind is one of those things at the core of worldwide religious experience.

Then the idea of gods and the fantastic temples where they are worshiped. But let's focus on the gods. How often do we see religions developing the idea of grand superhuman identifiable figures, someone you can talk to, someone who has, in a way, a personal relationship to you but is supernaturally powerful and yet a personality. These are the gods. In some cases, pantheons of great complexity and large population are developed but behind those pantheons is often the idea of a supreme god or supreme being that is not so easily envisioned, doesn't have a personality that's crusty or loving or forgiving or heroic but is something above and beyond that.

So having created gods, our earliest ancestors strove to get to know them and that became part of the religious quest that leads to visions, another bedrock element. How many times have we seen the use of certain special places, substances, techniques like meditation,



deprivation of food, of sleep, all intended to get the vision or the vision coming unbidden to someone, whether it's Tutmosis seeing Horus on the horizon as he sleeps under the Sphinx, Pachacuti again seeing Inti, the sun come to him and running away at first in terror, those patriarchs of the Old Testament, visions of God talking to them as one person talks to another and them talking back in that same way. The vision of the Buddha under that tree, all of these things tie in with the idea of vision being something essential, something that comes unbidden to people that again, is part of that bedrock religious experience.

So what is the place of religion in human culture, history, and in individual human life? I, like many archaeologists, lecture in a department of anthropology. If you look through any anthropology textbook, cultural anthropology, and if you look through most archaeology textbooks, where do you find religion? Well it's the last chapter or almost the last chapter. It's considered something to be worked up to. It's considered to be something that's part of the complexities, but it's also considered to be a result of the prime movers in human life, which are held to be subsistent systems. How do people make a living from the land? Are they hunters and gatherers? Are they agriculturalists? Social systems, which include kinship, how do you reckon your relatives, and what's your place within the different strata that develop in more complex societies? Economic systems, how do you move wealth and resources around? All of these are held to be the prime movers, and religion is off on one side generated as a function of the particular sets of subsistent systems, kinship and social systems, and economic systems that are the real engines of the society.

I want to go on record as saying to you I have come to believe that view is false. I believe that religion occupies a primary central place in human affairs. The way I'd like to convince you of that is to point out to you the number of cases we have seen where gigantic monuments in a civilization are entirely devoted to religious purposes, that the ingenuity of the engineers and the scientists is devoted to the religion, and that these same techniques and this same expenditure of time and wealth doesn't appear in the ordinary lives of the population. Often I find in modern social sciences texts, the relegation of religion to a tool of the elite. At places like Cahokia, we hear lectures on the subject of how the elite of Cahokia, and we have to imagine this happening somehow consciously in a scheming sort

of way, develop rituals, develop a religious framework in which they will seem essential to the community and the vast 90, 95, 99 percent of the population do the bidding of the elite because of this religious awe and fear and elaborate scenic effects that the elite have surrounded themselves with. I think this is completely false. I think that societies generate religious leaders. They generate a religious aura, and it's remarkable to me that the elite in many cases do not live in places more elaborate than the religious façade that they have allegedly created to sustain their own personal lifestyle of grandeur and pleasure.

On the contrary at a place like Stonehenge, which must have had some central authority to dictate its complex layout, Stonehenge is entirely religious. Nobody lived there. We can't find the places in most cases, where people lived. We've got Durrington Walls, that village that was seasonally occupied by the people who came to Stonehenge and the surrounding sacred landscape of Salisbury Plain for those seasonal feasts, but we don't find great palaces. We don't find a beautiful life lived by people that are using the technology, the engineering, the resources poured into religious monuments for their own benefit, for their own glory. That is true even with most of the monarchs we have seen. The palaces of Egyptian Pharaohs are not as impressive as their tombs and their temples. The science that went into the Great Pyramid or to Stonehenge is expressed only in the religious sphere. So I would put religion as the driving force in many areas of human history.

A recurring force in our own time because of the last element that I would like to address, the element of the personal. We saw religion first emerge in a family setting, the burial of dead loved ones. We saw it move to a setting of a larger band of many families initiating their young, young men, young women, in these caves, into the mysteries of the spirit world making them, after that ceremony, men, women, where they had before been children. They do this through enlightenment. Religion began on a very personal level. It is true that we then experienced, step by step, the creation of the idea of intermediaries be they kings or priests or priestesses who stood between the ordinary person like you and me and the god, the spirit world, but we also see, consistently through time, bubbling up like water from a spring that cannot be suppressed no matter how many stones you try to cap it with, bubbling up the spirit of the individual, the desire for the individual person to make the sacrifice, to be part

of the mysteries, to break through the veil whether it's in a Mithraic underground cave or a Christian temple or a Buddhist monastery, the idea of each person beyond the grandeur, beyond the huge sacred monuments, experiencing that moment long sought through a life never forgotten when it occurs. When thanks to all of this background of religious faith, the sacred time, the sacred place, even the sacred rituals, the light breaks through. A vision is granted to that one person, and the life is changed forever.

## Timeline

### Ancient Eras and the Creation of Sacred Sites

Note that most dates are approximate.

#### B.C.

- 45,000.....Neanderthal groups inhabit Shanidar Cave in northern Iraq and bury their dead in pits. Shanidar is the earliest positively identified site of ancient religious ritual.
- 25,000.....Hunting groups in South Africa, ancestors of the modern San, create their rock art.
- 16,000.....Cro-Magnon hunters of the Upper Paleolithic era create religious paintings and small Venus figurines in Lascaux cave in France.
- 9000 .....At Gobekli Tepe in southeast Turkey, a hunting community begins to erect stone temples like those later found on Malta.
- 7500 .....A Neolithic society of hunters, herders, and horticulturalists creates a pueblo-type community at Çatalhöyük in south central Turkey (Anatolia). By 6500 B.C. the inhabitants were creating masterpieces of religious art and interring their dead beneath the floors of their houses.
- 4500 .....The tradition of raising megalithic monuments begins in Atlantic Europe.
- 3800–2500.....Neolithic seafarers and farmers create stone temples to the Mother Goddess on the island of Malta.



2550 .....	The Great Pyramid is completed at Giza, Egypt.
2500 .....	Pu-abi is buried at Ur, Sumeria (southern Iraq).
2500–2300.....	At Stonehenge, a circle of stones are added to a complex of circular ditches and post holes that had already been the target of ritual activity for about 700 years.
2000 .....	A Bronze Age society erects the first palace or ceremonial center at Knossos. The original palace burned in about 1700 B.C. The grand New Palace flourished until about 1350 B.C. The site was abandoned after 1200 B.C.
1350 .....	Amenhotep IV takes the name Akhenaten and converts Egypt to the monotheistic worship of Aten. This faith dominates Egypt for a single generation.
1300–1050.....	The Shang dynasty is established and rules an extensive territory from their capital at Anyang, China.
1000 .....	In Bronze Age Scandinavia, a society of farmers and warriors records their elaborate religious rituals in petroglyphs.
432 .....	The Parthenon is built on the Acropolis in Athens, which had already seen a millennium of royal and ceremonial use. Its importance as a religious site would continue down to modern times.

300 .....	The oracular shrine of the Greek god Apollo at Klaros, Asia Minor, begins its slow rise to fame and fortune; the Nabateans, who built the city of Petra, begin a lucrative four-century rule over the caravan routes between the Red Sea and the Mediterranean; Jenne-jeno (Old Jenne), where the ironworkers formed a religious elite, is established along the Niger River in Mali.
221 .....	China is unified under Qin Shihuangdi, now known as the First Emperor.
100 .....	The Hopewell cult appears in the Ohio and Mississippi River valleys of North America, creating numerous ceremonial sites over the next 500 years.
	<b>A.D.</b>
68 .....	With Roman legions about to crush the Jewish Revolt, the sectarian group that had inhabited Qumran for over a century (perhaps the Essenes) hid their sacred scrolls in the surrounding caves and abandoned the site.
100 .....	At Lindow Moss, England, a healthy and high-ranking Celtic male aged about 25, possibly a Druid, submitted to a sacrificial death and burial in bog.

200 .....	Rome has become a multicultural city where many different faiths and cults are practiced, including Mithraism, Christianity, Judaism, the cult of Isis, and occult rites of magic and sorcery.
300–900.....	Teotihuacan, northeast of modern Mexico City, dominates Mesoamerica.
400 .....	At Ajanta in central India, quarrymen and sculptors enlarged an earlier set of Buddhist monastic dwellings to create the Ajanta Caves. The site was used for about a century.
450 .....	Zoroastrian magi establish a holy city at Takht-i Sulaiman in northern Iran.
500 .....	On the north coast of Peru, the “Lord of Sipán” is buried with finely wrought gold ornaments and eight human sacrifices.
600 .....	The Nazca of Peru’s coastal desert come to the climax of some 500 years of creating large-scale images and gigantic line drawings in the desert.
675 .....	At Palenque in eastern Mexico, a ruler named Pacal or Pakal (“Shield”) begins work on the stepped stone pyramid that would later hold his sarcophagus.
700–1130.....	Period of the Anasazi settlement at Chaco Canyon in modern New Mexico.
700–1500.....	Period of erecting large stone heads, known as moai, on Easter Island.

834 .....	At Oseberg, near Oslo in Norway, a Viking queen and a female attendant are given a rich and elaborate burial in a big sea-going ship.
900 .....	Mississippian people establish a great center at Cahokia, across the river from modern St. Louis. The site reached its climax between 1100 and 1200 A.D.
1000 .....	The Anasazi begin to create ceremonial centers on a large scale at sites such as Pueblo Bonito and Chetro Ketl.
1113–1150.....	Khmer king Suryavarman II builds the gigantic Hindu temple of Angkor Wat in Cambodia.
1450 .....	The Inca ruler Pachacuti builds Machu Picchu, partly as a royal estate and retreat, partly as a ceremonial center, or <i>huaca</i> .

## Glossary

**ahu:** The term used by Easter Islanders to designate one of the rectangular stone platforms erected around their coasts as a marker of a clan's territory, a center for religious rites, and a storage place for sacred images. The famous stone heads, or moai, originally stood in rows on the ahus, as if on a stage, but most had been overturned by the time Europeans reached Easter Island.

**animism:** From the Latin *anima*, "spirit" or "breath," the belief that every aspect of the natural world—animal, plant, rock, water, wind, or celestial body—has its own spirit. Animism is often found among hunting and gathering societies, whose religious specialists, or shamans, grapple with the spirits on behalf of their people.

**caryatid:** In classical architecture, a column in the form of a human or divine being. The most famous caryatids are the stone sculptures of Athenian priestesses who uphold the roof of the porch on the Erechtheum temple.

**cromlech:** The term used in Brittany for a megalithic monument in the form of a circle of standing stones. The cromlech is thus ancestral to the great circle of sarsen stones at Stonehenge in England.

**cuneiform:** From the Latin *cuneus*, "wedge," the form of writing originating in Mesopotamia and later used throughout the Near East in which clusters of wedge-shaped strokes were imprinted on clay or carved on stone. Cuneiform characters could be words, ideograms, or phonetic symbols. The script, which was used to express a number of different languages, remained undeciphered until the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

**devaraja:** From the Sanskrit for "god-king," the term used by the Khmer people of Cambodia to designate the imperial rulers who had their capital at Angkor.

**dolmen:** In the Celtic language of Brittany, a stone table. The term is now used for those megalithic tombs that consist of three or four upright slabs supporting a large capstone.

**henge monument:** In British archaeology, technically an earthwork consisting of a circular ditch and a ringlike wall made from the excavated soil, chalk, or substratum. Confusingly, the term comes from the traditional name Stonehenge, where the "henge" refers to the hanging stone lintels that are unique to that site, not to the

surrounding ditch and ring of earth. In more general parlance, a woodhenge would be a circle of upright timber posts, such as was erected at ancient Cahokia in Illinois.

**hieroglyphic:** Literally "sacred inscription," the term is now used for the type of elaborate, stylized, pictographic script that was developed by such ancient peoples as the Egyptians and the Maya.

**huaca:** In Inca cosmography, a point or location of special spiritual power in the natural landscape. Lines of *huacas* radiated out across the countryside from the Inca capital at Cuzco.

**hypogeum:** Literally "below the earth," an artificially constructed cave below ground level. The most famous hypogeum is in Malta, where it served as a communal mausoleum for thousands of individuals in the Neolithic era.

**initiation:** In the religious sense, a rite of passage or a ceremony in which an individual begins a new spiritual life with a new social identity. During such rites, the initiates are customarily separated from the main group and are admitted to sacred places, where sacred symbols are revealed and the mysteries of life and death are explained.

**ka:** In the Egyptian religion, the aspect of the human soul that represents the spirit or life force. When the ka leaves the body, death occurs. The ka can be kept alive by offerings of food and drink at the tomb, though only the spiritual essence of these material offerings is consumed by the ka.

**kiva:** To archaeologists, one of the circular rooms, usually subterranean or partially subterranean, that served for religious and ceremonial purposes in such Anasazi complexes as Pueblo Bonito in Chaco Canyon. The term has been adopted from the modern Hopi word for a ceremonial house.

**lingam:** In Hindu iconography, the phallic emblem of the god Shiva, an emblem of life force, fertility, and regeneration. In each of the early Khmer temples at Angkor, the king (as the incarnation of Shiva) would erect a lingam as a focal point of worship and spiritual power.

**lur:** A musical instrument of Bronze Age Scandinavia consisting of a long, curved tube of bronze with a mouthpiece at one end and a decorated flaring bell at the other. Pictures of lur players in the

petroglyphs of southern Sweden show that they were played in ensembles of two or three. Replicas produce notes that are deep and resounding, well suited to accompany the sacred rites in which they are depicted.

**mana:** In the religions of the South Pacific, spiritual force. It may be inherent in a person, an artifact, a natural object, or a place. The presence of mana accords with the idea of the sacred in English.

**menhir:** In the megalithic terminology of western Europe, a single standing stone. Menhirs erected in modern times in such places as Madagascar and New Guinea were often raised to honor great men or commemorate important events.

**moai:** Name given by Easter Islanders to the great stone heads that were carved in the quarries of volcanic stone in the crater at Rano Raraku and then dragged to the coast to be set up on ahus. The heads are believed to represent honored ancestors.

**mystery cult:** From the Greek *mystai*, “initiates,” Greek mystery cults inducted initiates into a new spiritual awareness through special, secret ceremonies in dark halls, caves, or isolated spots, where officiants revealed the true meaning behind life and death. Mystery cults were very personal, as opposed to the typical sacrificial cults of the state religion in ancient Greece and Rome. The Eleusinian mysteries, celebrated near Athens, were the most famous and later influenced both Christianity and Mithraism.

**omphalos:** From the Greek for “navel,” a stone that indicated to pilgrims that they had reached the center of the world at Delphi, an oracular shrine originally sacred to the earth mother Ge. In time, the omphalos stone became associated with the prophet god Apollo, so that its presence at Apollo temples such as the one at Klaros in Asia Minor was enough to indicate the presence of the god.

**oracle:** A prophetic message, the individual who speaks the message on behalf of a supernatural force, and/or the site where the divination ceremonies or consultations are held. Oracles are encountered in many religious traditions.

**peplos:** In ancient Greece, the single piece of cloth that was worn as a garment by women, usually woven of wool or linen. In Athenian state religion, the peplos was the special embroidered garment that was draped over the sacred image of the goddess. The peplos in the

Erechtheum on the Acropolis (where the holy image of Athena was kept) was used for a year, then replaced with a newly created robe at the time of the midsummer Panathenaic festival.

**petroglyph:** From the Greek for “rock” and “inscribe,” a specimen of rock art. In archaeological terms, petroglyphs may be either carved or painted on natural rock surfaces. They play an important role in depicting religious images and rites among the San of South Africa, the aborigines of Australia, and the Bronze Age Scandinavians of southern Sweden. The tradition is found worldwide.

**rongo-rongo:** On Easter Island, the script developed as a series of pictograms used for ceremonial purposes. Tablets inscribed with rongo-rongo writing were found in various ahus around the island, but the script has not yet been deciphered.

**sarsen:** The enormous upright stones in the main circle at Stonehenge, which were dragged more than 20 miles across Salisbury Plain from their point of origin on the Marlborough Downs. Sarsens are slabs that have been roughed out of hard, dense sandstone, and some are still found in their original geological positions. The origin of the name is unknown.

**scapulimancy:** Literally “prophesying with shoulder blades,” the type of divination practiced by Chinese kings of the Shang dynasty at their court at Anyang. Both scapula (usually sheep or ox) and tortoise shells were used in this oracular procedure, in which a hot poker was pressed against the bone or shell. The resulting cracks were interpreted as the answer to a question that had been spoken, and afterward scribes wrote the question (and sometimes the answer also) directly onto the object. These bones make up the earliest large corpus of Chinese writing.

**shaman:** From Siberian, this term is now applied to all spiritual specialists who act as medicine men or medicine women on behalf of their clans or tribes. Shamans typically master a great deal of botanical, historical, and other traditional lore, but when actually in action they often go into a trance state in which they encounter and overcome the spirits that are harming or endangering their people. Shamanism is typically a component of an animistic religious tradition, although in Maya centers shamans still served the common people at a time when the ceremonial centers were dominated by kings, gods, priests, and temples.

**sipapu:** In the traditions of the modern Pueblo tribes such as the Hopi, a mythical hole through which the ancestral humans emerged into this world from the dark underworld, led by a figure named Locust who was playing a flute. The souls of the dead now pass to the Third World or underworld through this primal *sipapu*, but the figure named Coyote has placed a stone over the hole so that only kachinas spiritus can reemerge from it. The term *sipapu* also applied to the symbolic holes that were placed at the centers of kivas, and such *sipapus* could also take the form of water holes or other features in the natural landscape.

**tapu:** In the religious traditions of the South Pacific, the term applied to persons, objects, or places that have been declared supremely sacred by the religious authorities and must be left strictly alone and untouched—hence our modern Western word “taboo.”

**tell:** From Arabic, an artificial hill composed of layer upon layer of ancient cities. Tells form in areas where mud brick was used for buildings, and the decay of the architecture through time seals in the old living floors and streets and allows for new construction on top. Troy was a tell with at least nine superimposed settlements; other famous tells are Jericho and Ur.

**triclinia:** Pieces of built-in furniture consisting of benches around three sides of a room. Greeks and Romans used *triclinia* in their dining rooms, and the Nabataeans of Petra adopted the design for their tomb chambers, where feasting with the dead was an important ritual for families of the deceased.

**ziggurat:** From the Akkadian for “building on a raised area,” now used to designate the stepped pyramids in the ancient cities of Mesopotamia and surrounding areas. Each ziggurat had a shrine or small temple at its summit, accessible only to priests (and possibly kings). Ziggurats, often built of mud brick with an external sheathing of fired brick or bitumen, were the chief features of religious complexes that included courtyards, places of sacrifice, places of purification, storerooms, and living quarters for priests. The ziggurat of Babylon is the origin of the biblical Tower of Babel.

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## About Your Great Course

The most important record of religious history resides not in books and sacred texts but buried in the earth. Ancient graves, statues, temples, standing stones, sacrificial offerings, and places of initiation all bear witness to the universal human quest for spiritual power and understanding. Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, excavators have been discovering and interpreting evidence ranging from tiny goddess figurines to entire sacred landscapes. For many religions and cults, the "testimony of the spade" provides an essential perspective on the religious literary tradition. This course explores sacred sites worldwide, including the shrines of ancient Greek oracles and the religious rock art of Bronze Age Scandinavians. We will witness the unifying as well as distinguishing characteristics behind the universal, timeless quest for the divine.

## Exploring the Roots of Religion

### Part 3

- Lecture 25: Celestial Gateway at Giza
- Lecture 26: Cosmic Hub at Stonehenge
- Lecture 27: Desert Lines at Nazca
- Lecture 28: Skywatchers at Chaco Canyon
- Lecture 29: Mountain of the Gods at Angkor
- Lecture 30: The Stone Heads of Easter Island
- Lecture 31: Tending Zoroaster's Sacred Fire in Iran
- Lecture 32: Writing the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran
- Lecture 33: Taking Religions Underground at Rome
- Lecture 34: Forging Iron at Jenne-jeno on the Niger
- Lecture 35: Carving Monasteries at Ajanta in India
- Lecture 36: Faiths Lost and Found

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